

MARIANNE'S  
MAIL ORDER  
BRIDES

# A Match for Polly

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR  
LYNN DONOVAN

# A Match for Polly

## Marianne's Mail Order Bride, Book #10



Lynn Donovan

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A Match for Polly, A MATCH FOR POLLY Series

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# About this Series

Be sure to read all the books in this series.

Book 1 – A Match for Collette, by Lynn Donovan

Book 2 – A Match for Sarah, by Marlene Bierworth

Book 3 – A Match for Esther Rose, by Lynn Donovan

Book 4 – A Match for Hannah, by Marianne Spitzer

Book 5 – A Match for Willa, by Lynn Donovan

Book 6 – A Match for Victoria, by Christine Sterling

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Book 10 – A Match for Polly, Lynn Donovan

Book 11 – A Match for Bernadette, Parker J. Cole

Book 12 – A Match for Judith, by Christine Sterling

# Introduction

Polly Ashburn is afraid of the Big Bad Wolfe. Edgar Wolfe, that is.

When her late father's will gives away everything, including her hand in marriage, Polly seeks a reputable matchmaker to help her marry anybody else, immediately.

Will Polly's plan work to get rid of the man who is all wrong for her? Will the incredibly timid Riggins Tanner be strong enough to stand up to her nemesis?

A heart-warming romance filled with twists and turns for Polly and Riggins that will keep you turning the page.

# Chapter One



Denver, Colorado. 1878

Marianne Gordon stared at the telegram in her hand. A tight sensation knotted in her stomach. This was a first! She'd never received a telegram reply to the Bride-Wanted ad in the matrimonial times before. This reply bore such urgency! This woman must need Marianne's help desperately!

It wasn't the typical curt words printed or the fact that it was sent by telegram, rather than a letter, that warned Marianne of Miss Polly Ashburn's need to marry as quickly as possible. It was a feeling Marianne had the minute she touched the telegram, then confirmed by reading the benign words.

Need good husband.

Will wed at arrival.

2 days.

Polly Ashburn

Marianne gave it one more read-through. Not that she didn't recall what the telegram stated, but that she wanted to confirm the anxious tightening in her stomach wasn't something to do with her need to eat supper. The sensation only grew stronger with each read. This woman needed help, and quickly.

Just then a loud rap caused the backroom door to her friend's diner to rattle on its hinges. Marianne held office for her matchmaking business back there while Pearl ran her diner from the front.

The thin telegraph paper rustled like autumn leaves in Marianne's hand as she started from the sudden sound, and then she sighed. That had to be Riggins Tanner. Again. He appeared just as urgent about learning Marianne had a bride to match him with as Miss Ashburn seemed to be with this telegram.

He had been a hard one to match. The man was strong and

handsome. Due to his occupation of handling heavy carcasses to tan the hides and tote heavy vats of chemicals for the processing, he had a physique that piqued the girls' interest. But... he was timid. Very timid. It would take a special sort of woman to feel comfortable and safe as his helpmeet. Marianne had not found the right gal for him, yet.

Or had she? She rolled her eyes up, thinking. Could this be a divine sign? She floated to the door and pulled it open. "Evening, Mr. Tanner."

"Uh, evening." He seemed to say out of necessity and not as a polite greeting. "You headin' home? M-may I walk you?"

Marianne chuckled. This was his way of asking if she had a match for him. He would escort her home and nonchalantly ask if there was any news about a bride. "Actually, Mr. Tanner, come in. Let's talk."

His eyes widened. "You got me a gal?"

"Well," Marianne hesitated. Could she trust her instincts on this one? She knew nothing about this Polly Ashburn. Nothing. How could she tell Riggins that this gal was the one?

Her gut said it was.

"Maybe." She let her trepidation resound in the word.

"Really?" Riggins swallowed hard, as if his throat had suddenly gone dry as a drought-parched gully.

"Now..." Marianne glanced at the telegram one more time. Verifying in her heart that this felt right. She'd matched so many unlikely couples when she worked as Archibald Gordon's assistant in the Pinkerton Detective Agency. Why did she doubt herself this time? Even Archie and she were an oddly matched couple, but they were happily married now, these six years later.

"I hold in my hand" —she gave her gut one more chance to tell her no, but it remained silent. She forged ahead— "an answer to the ad for brides. This one is a little different, but I gotta feeling—"

"How different?" Riggins bobbed his head. "I trust you, Mrs. Gordon. Your reputation precedes you when it comes to these matters of the heart."



Marianne lifted her eyes to his. She'd never heard him string together so many words at one time.

"I just want a good wife who will stay put."

"Well, now, see..." Marianne realized she had bit her lip. The blood made her want to gag, but she swallowed instead. "I don't really know this girl. I should really take my time and get to know her, before—"

"Before, what?" Riggins fidgeted in his chair.

"Well, she is willing to wed upon arrival."

Riggins nodded vigorously. "I can do that. When does she arrive?"

Marianne looked at him sternly. "Two days."

"Oh." His enthusiasm fizzled but then revived. "I can marry her in two days. I should talk to the Pastor."

"Not tonight, Mr. Tanner. I would think it too late to speak to Pastor Stephens. Surely he will be getting ready for supper at this late hour."

"You're right." Riggins conceded. "I'll talk to Quinn before I open my shop tomorrow morning."

Marianne nodded. "That's better, and meanwhile I'll gather some girls who help me at the last minute to prepare the sanctuary for an impromptu wedding two days from now."

"Right." Riggins leapt to his feet. "Good. So, it's set. I'm getting married in two days." He paused. "I'm getting married in two days," he said much slower, as if he were trying to absorb the idea.

"Yes, it looks like you are." Marianne smiled.

He didn't return the smile. In fact, his demeanor suddenly melted into deep concern. She wanted to laugh. He'd pestered her for months to find him a bride and now that he had one coming, was he reconsidering? She walked him to the door. "I'll let you know when she has arrived."

"Yeah, sure. Thank you." He placed his hat on his head and walked toward his leather goods store. His apartment, like so many merchants in the depot district, was a staircase walk to the space above his shop. The tanning shop sat mid-block just a short section

and a half from Pearl's Diner.

Marianne needed to get home, too. Her friend Jackie would be worn out keeping up with her five-year-old son, Michael. Her husband would be home soon wanting a hot cooked meal. Maybe she could take home something from Pearl's for dinner? It wouldn't be cheating, exactly. The meal would be hot and made by hand, just not her own hands.

She sighed. Hopefully, Riggins Tanner and Polly Ashburn would be as content and happy in their marriage as she and Archie were in theirs. It was what she hoped for all her couples that she matched. So far, they were, as far as she knew.

While she felt confident in her stomach that they were the right pair to bring together, her heart spied a hint of a red flag, a warning that there might be a bumpy road ahead for them to get to that point of peace and harmony in their match. But what marriage didn't present a bit of a rough ride in life? Rough times were what made marriages stronger.

Well, time would tell. She wasn't a fortune teller. Just a matchmaker with a pretty solid record of making good matches. She had to rely on that fact to carry her forward with arranging for Riggins Tanner to marry Polly Ashburn in two days.

## Chapter Two



Polly Ashburn walked the floor, retracing her steps across her father's imported rug. His den still smelled of the familiar cigars and brandy that he had consumed over the years. It was the only room in her late father's house where she could think clearly. Anywhere else, including her own bedroom, befuddled her mind. She just could not be befuddled right now. She needed to think.

The aromas lingering in this room aided her imagination to sense him sitting behind that huge, leather-inlaid desk watching her pace. She needed his presence now more than ever, even if it were imagined. While she had never been his favorite child, due partly to her gender and partly to the fact that he guarded his heart now that her predeceasing five brothers, one being her twin, had all gone to live with her momma in Heaven, she imagined that he held an affectionate gaze upon her worrisome fretting.

"Sit down!" He barked his orders in her pretense. "You're gonna wear out my rug."

She smiled to herself under his imagined concern, but she couldn't sit. There was so little time and so much that had to fall into place for her plan to work. She had packed appropriate clothing and would board the train when it arrived. Now that the Union Pacific had finally laid tracks from Wyoming to Denver and beyond, what had been a two-day, old-fashioned wagon road was now a modern half-day rail ride to the big city. Well, at least Denver was bigger than Fort Collins.

All she could do now was wait for the train. It was a quarter mile from the ranch to the depot, but she would be able to see the train approaching long before it pulled into Fort Collins proper, because the rail had been laid along the northwestern fence line of the ranch.

Sleep wouldn't avail her any rest, there was too much on her mind. Instead, she waited in her father's den, pacing through the night

for that first sign the train was headed to Fort Collins. She didn't dare wait at the depot. Edgar Wolfe was watching her every move. She had to get out of town unseen for her plan to work. And her plan *had* to work!

Thank God Willow and Red O'Byrne were on her side to help her make this quick escape! She supposed they didn't want to be held captive under Mr. Wolfe's greedy manipulations as the new ranch owner any more than she did.

Having come to her father's ranch as Irish immigrants with nothing but the clothes on their backs, they served Lance Ashburn as indentured servants until their indenture contract ended. It was then that they made the decision to remain with the ranch. Willow, as Polly's nanny and later as the housekeeper, and Red as the stable master.

Today they were paid staff but felt more like family than employees to Polly. Since her momma died when she was so little, she knew Willow as the only mother-figure in her life. Her father was very business-minded and imparted little affection on Polly. However, he had made certain she learned the nuances of good horse breeding and the details of running a horse ranch.

Now, all that she had thought would be her future at Rafter-A Horse Ranch was threatened by one greedy imbecile who had wormed his way into her daddy's business as a partner. She had never liked Edgar Wolfe and never understood why her father had built an alliance with him. Today, he was the most loathsome person she had ever been acquainted with.

The memory burned in her mind from just the other day. Lance Ashburn was barely cold in his grave when Edgar Wolfe shoved papers in Polly's face, claiming her father, his business partner, had left everything to him, including the promise of marriage *to her*.

Furious, she had perused the papers swiftly while he stood triumphantly over her. They looked real. The signature looked like her father's, albeit weak and scrawled at an odd angle. Had Mr. Wolfe managed to get her father's signature at his death bed? She scanned the script, praying something would stand out as an escape clause.

It was there.

Wolfe's claim to everything was accounted as true *if she remained an unmarried woman at the time of execution of the will*. Waving the papers in her face was not a legal execution. She had a way out from under this nightmare tyranny of his. But how? How could she thwart these papers' mandated decree?

Not knowing how or what she could do, she had stalled him by demanding her father's legal counsel review the papers before executing them formally.

"If my father's legal counsel finds these papers to be rightly my father's last and final testimony, then I shall marry you." She had stated with her chin held high and her heart pounding.

"Fine." Wolfe had conceded. "Let's go see them now."

"I don't know if they can see us... just showing up like that." She considered her options. "But I'll go with you, and we can make an appointment."

Truth be told, she prayed they would *only* be able to make an appointment to come back after the papers had been thoroughly reviewed. She needed time and this was the only ruse she could come up with at the moment.

"O'Byrne!" Wolfe bellowed. "Hitch up the buggy and bring it around. I will escort Miss Ashburn to town this fine day." His grin made her stomach ache.

She excused herself to change into dark traveling clothes instead of her mother's mourning gown, with Willow's assistance, of course. She and Willow took advantage of their time alone to devise a more thorough plan in her bedroom.

Willow was like a mother to Polly, and right now, she and Red were the only two people she could trust. Having been the sixth child born to Lance Ashburn and the only child who lived beyond a year, she was the rightful heir to her father's estate. Edgar Wolfe shouldn't have any rights to anything belonging to her family. It was unfair, but it was what it was, and she had to do something to fix it, and fast.

Willow had noticed an ad in the Matrimonial Times insert in the newspaper. It was from a matchmaker in Denver. Their spontaneous

scheme was for Polly to quickly answer the ad, escape from Fort Collins, and marry in Denver, return to the Rafter-A Ranch and claim everything for herself.

While she and Mr. Wolfe were in Fort Collins, she hoped to find a way to get a telegram sent to the matchmaker in Denver and buy a train ticket to the city. Later, she'd stow away in the back of Red's wagon as he went into Fort Collins on his usual goods run. She would slip out on the backside of the depot, where no one could see her. While Red pretended to examine a problem with one of the wagon wheels, he'd wait until he knew Polly had safely boarded the train, and report back to Willow that she was safely on her way.

Normally, Polly would have been angry with the behavior of the law firm's secretary, but this time, she knew it was the work of angels granting her prayers. The affronted secretary looked down his long nose at a scheduling book and lavishly dipped his pen to write in an appointment with Mr. Puckett for next week. "Wednesday at nine o'clock in the morning." He spoke with such disdain. "It is the best we can do."

She silently sighed in relief and maintained a grateful smile at the secretary. Wolfe, however, showed his true colors, once again, by demanding with a fist slammed down on the man's desk that he be allowed to speak to Puckett today.

Unwavering and unimpressed by Wolfe's show of violence, the secretary repeated. "It's the best we can do."

Part one of the plan behind her, she persuaded Mr. Wolfe to allow her to retrieve a new dress from the dress shop, Mary Bell's Fashions. Could it have been more angel work that she had ordered this dress made but not had time to come pick it up? This gave her an opportunity to complete part two of her plan.

She implored the seamstress's help. Miss Mary Bell Cannington agreed without question and sent her assistant to the train depot to buy Polly's ticket to Denver. "And hurry back." Miss Cannington instructed her assistant while she stalled for time by insisting Polly do a final fitting. Wolfe waited impatiently on the boardwalk, pacing back and forth by the little window. Polly had to be careful that she

didn't appear to be wasting his time with idle chit chat. Miss Cannington took her time by putting on a show of examining the fit until her assistant returned through the alley door.

Polly put the ticket in the pocket of her new dress and let Miss Cannington box it up as she normally would. Meanwhile, Polly scratched out what she needed on a telegram and to whom it needed to be sent. Appearing to be paying Miss Cannington for the tailored dress, she counted out an amount that not only covered the dress but also the cost of a cable and a little extra for the woman's time.

Polly left the shop under Wolfe's watchful escort, leaving the task in Miss Cannington's capable hands. As long as the trusted woman sent the telegram to the matchmaker, the third part of the plan would be in place. Polly insisted on dropping into the haberdashery next to the dress shop to buy a new hat to go with her new dress. Wolfe's patience was wearing thin, but upon Polly's promise to be quick, he agreed. She had seen exactly what she wanted in the window and knew it would not take long to make the purchase.

Part four of her plan was to wear this new, dark red dress that no one had seen before along with the enormous, yet fashionable, hat to help hide her face. It was dark enough to honor her state of mourning, but not the typical color to alert anyone that she was, indeed, a woman in mourning. Once at the train depot, she would drag her small trunk to the cargo car where it would be loaded. Then she'd walk like any normal traveler to the passenger car and board. If all went as planned, Fort Collins and Edgar Wolfe would fade from her view tomorrow morning.

Once married, she would come back as Missus Whatever to force Edgar Wolfe off her ranch and out of her life forever! That was the whole plan, and she could only pray each part of it work out as smoothly as the first four pieces had.

"Miss Ashburn?" Red stood at her father's den door with his hat in his hands. His voice snapped her mind back to the present. He spoke quietly even though he, Willow, and she were the only people in the house at the moment. Edgar Wolfe had taken a bed in the bunk house office as if he were the head ranch hand, but she knew he

planned to move into the big house as soon as the will had been confirmed and no one could contest his doing so. Thank God that had been postponed to next week.

“Thank you.” She gathered her hat and her courage, and let him lead the way to his wagon. He’d parked the mule and wagon at the back door off of the kitchen’s mud room, as if he were loading goods to be taken to town, and so that Polly could slip into the wagon without being seen from the bunk house. Those goods Red already loaded were her trunk and a bedroll for her to lie on while they left the ranch.

Dawn slowly overtook the night’s cover of darkness. The train’s steam billowed in the distance as it chugged toward town, and she prayed the rest of the plan she and Willow devised worked exactly as ascribed.

Soon, she sat on the train. Her heart pounded from the terror that Edgar Wolfe would catch on and somehow be at the depot to stop her.

He wasn’t.

So why did her heart act as if it had been a narrow escape? She laid her head back on the tall, padded seat rest and closed her eyes, imagining how her time in Denver would go. Would the matchmaker be able to find a man willing to marry her sight unseen, without any information about her or her family? What kind of fool would agree to marry a woman under those circumstances? Did she really want to be married to such a man? Her heart beat even harder.

What would she do if she arrived and the matchmaker had no one for her to marry? Her heart pounded harder. What then? How long could she be away from the ranch before Edgar Wolfe discovered she was gone? Would he forego the legal reading of the will, with her gone, and claim everything to be his? Would he boot Willow and Red O’Byrne out of the servants’ room and move himself into her father’s bedroom?

Or would he keep the current staff in the positions they had before her father’s death? Certainly, he would need a housekeeper and stable master? Would he just begin his tyranny despite what was right



and legal? So many fears balled in her gut. This had to work! For so many reasons, it just had to work!

Forcing her breath to slow to a normal rhythm, she looked forward to seeing Wolfe's face when she brought a husband home to show him that his ploy was foiled.

And by a girl! All her life, she'd lived under the shadow of being a girl, being less because she was female. Her father died before she had a chance to prove herself in the horse breeding business. Perhaps she had finally found a way to prove being a girl was not such a shortcoming as her father and Mr. Wolfe imagined.

The law firm would announce that since she was married before the will was executed, she and her new husband inherited her father's horse ranch—the business, land, livestock, buildings, and, more importantly, her hand.

Polly mumbled a prayer and let the sway of the rails lull her into a sense of false security. When next she opened her eyes, the sun shone brightly through the curtained windows. Passengers were pulling the drapes apart to let in the brilliant light. What had been a wagon road was now a railway and wound around and through the mountains. The scenery was lovely. They were a few hours from Denver, and soon she would be married.

If all went as planned.

[OBI]



The south-bound train rolled into Denver Depot District around three o'clock in the afternoon. Riggins stood with Mrs. Gordon and the thin crowd to watch it screech to a complete stop. If Polly Ashburn was to arrive two days from the delivery of her telegram, this would be the day and the train she'd arrive on. Riggins swallowed the bile that tormented his attempt to appear composed.

This was it. He would greet his bride and escort her to the chapel where they would marry. By this evening, he'd be a married man.

He had scrubbed his apartment clean as a whistle, sent all his linens to the laundress and remade his bed, military style. He had even flipped a coin on the cover to verify it was as taut as possible. He

didn't have a lot to offer this woman other than his name, a sound occupation to support them both, and a very clean apartment in which to live.

Riggins watched as bodies moved inside the passenger car. Silhouettes, actually, as those who were getting out made their way to the platform. Riggins shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He wished Mrs. Gordon would say something reassuring to help calm his nerves, but she, too, looked pale and nervous. What if this Miss Ashburn had changed her mind and wasn't aboard the train? How would Riggins handle the humiliation after Pastor Stephens and Mrs. Gordon's friends had prepared the church for his wedding.

His heart slammed into his ribs as a large red hat emerged from the train car, worn by a beautiful woman in a matching blood-red dress. Her dark hair neatly held in place by a black net or something, which lay against her long slender neck. Was this her? His bride? His heart hoped it was, because he already felt he had fallen in love.

He swallowed hard and snatched his bowler from his head, pressing it against his pounding heart. Did the hat muffle the sound? Mrs. Gordon lifted her eyes to the woman and smiled. The woman smiled back and descended the steps. She looked fresh as a daisy. Unlike so many who disembark from a train after a long ride. But then again, this train from Wyoming to New Mexico had only carried her from Fort Collins to Denver, so she hadn't spent more than half a day traveling.

Still, she looked perfectly poised as if she'd just walked out of a dressing salon. Mrs. Gordon stepped forward. "Miss Ashburn?"

"Yes." The woman's voice sounded angelic to Riggins, and he smiled.

"I'm Marianne Gordon." Mrs. Gordon took the woman's hand in a gentle shake like women do and turned to present Riggins. He swallowed again, clutching his hat hard against his drumming chest. "And this is Mister Riggins Tanner. Why don't we step over here and take a moment?"

Riggins silently nodded a greeting to Miss Ashburn. She returned his silent salutation. The two of them followed Mrs. Gordon to the

shade of a bench seat. “So,” —Mrs. Gordon gestured for them to sit together— “have a seat and take a moment to speak to one another.”

Miss Ashburn swallowed. “Um... I am very pleased to meet you, Mr. Tanner.”

Riggins smiled. Her loved her melodic voice, like a chorus of angels speaking. It took his breath away. How did he get so lucky to be about to marry such an angelic and beautiful woman?

“Th-the pleasure’s all mine.” He managed to say.

Silence fell between them. Miss Ashburn turned to Mrs. Gordon, but Riggins couldn’t pull his eyes away from his bride. She sat like a lady of class, exuding the poise of a well-bred family.

Suddenly, he felt unworthy of this match. Mrs. Gordon had made a terrible mistake. There was no way such a refined woman would want to be married to a simple leather goods tanner such as himself. He was a simple man. He ate simple meals and wore simple, functional clothing. He had never changed for supper like the rich people did, although he’d heard talk of such practices. Any minute Miss Ashburn would realize the same thing and tell Mrs. Gordon she couldn’t accept this proposal.

Riggins gasped. He hadn’t proposed at all. He’d barely said anything. He glanced at Mrs. Gordon and licked his suddenly dry lips.

“I, uh, should I—” He moved his eyes as pointers to the ground in front of Miss Ashburn.

Mrs. Gordon smiled, graciously. “Yes, Mr. Tanner, go on and ask her.”

Riggins swallowed harder. His eyes met with the beautiful Miss Ashburn’s. Her dark eyes caused his head to spin. How he wanted to look into these eyes the rest of his life. Surely, she would announce her decision to turn back at any moment. Riggins reached out to take her gloved hand into his. She yanked her hand back. This was it. She would declare she no longer wanted this match.

But she didn’t say anything. Quickly, yanking her gloves from her hands, she put both hands back into his. He looked down at her delicate hands. They had a roughness to them, as if she’d worked with them, but not leathery like a servant’s hands. Who was this woman

and what did she do to have such unusually roughened hands for a lady?

Her hands were beautiful! They fit so perfectly in his, it was as if they had been made for each other, for this moment. He slid off the bench, onto one knee, and cleared his throat.

“Miss Polly Ashburn, I am a simple man, but I have a successful business and an adequate apartment. I can provide for you. I promise you will never go hungry or lacking in... clothing... or things that you need.” He hoped her needs were within his means and he was not just making promises he could not keep. He swallowed, again, trying to moisten his arid throat.

She still allowed him to hold her hands, so he continued. “I would be honored if you would marry me and make me the proudest and happiest man in Colorado.”

He paused. Waiting to know her answer. Everything around them seemed to halt in time. The people stopped moving. The voices faded to stark silence. Even the slight breeze that had been catching the edge of her hat and flipping it about had seemed to stop. A smile lifted the taut edges of her mouth. She lifted her chin and inhaled slowly. As she released her breath her lips parted. Her tongue just peeked between her lips and disappeared as she swallowed.

He wanted to kiss her at that moment. To silence her refusal to marry him by smothering her words with the kiss. If she never answered, he still had hope that they would marry. He’d only kissed one other girl, but it didn’t count, because she was his cousin. They had pecked each other on the lips and immediately spit over their shoulders. It had been an act of promise to always watch out for each other. That hadn’t worked out so well. She died in childbirth five years later. He regretted that he had not fulfilled that promise ever since.

With every ounce of willpower he possessed, he remained still and silent and waited for her answer.

“I—” she began to speak. A hesitation caught in her throat and she licked her lips again. His eyes dropped to those lips as he longed insufferably to know what they tasted like. “I... would be honored, as

well.”

Riggins let go the lungful of air he had been hanging on to.

“Whoa!” He exclaimed. “You would?”

She giggled. “Yes, I would.”

He laughed and Mrs. Gordon chortled. “Well, now that we have that out of the way. There’s a group of people waiting for you two at the church.”

Riggins crawled to his feet, still holding her hands, and pulled her into him. “Thank you.” He whispered, gingerly embracing her.

She was taller than most gals he knew, although he didn’t know any well enough to hold them like this. She seemed to meld into his tall frame like a well-made leather apron. If he didn’t know better, he’d think the Good Lord had planned for her to be his wife all along and had made him and her so that they perfectly fit in one another’s arms. It was incredible to think this perfect woman would soon be his wife.

He felt a slight tremble in her body, as he held her. Was she excited or scared? He leaned back from her and leveled his head to peer into her eyes. “Are you all right?”

She pursed her lips and bobbed her head.

“Yes,” she said, but he could see tears pooling across her dark lashes. He gave her one more squeeze for reassurance and guided her to walk behind Mrs. Gordon to a buggy he had rented from the livery. Miss Ashburn’s trunk had been offloaded. Riggins put it in the boot of the buggy and helped Mrs. Gordon and then his bride into the vehicle. Taking the reins, he clicked his tongue to the mare. She lunged forward. He looked over at Miss Ashburn. She smiled back at him, although she looked preoccupied.

He supposed every bride would be deep in thought just before they took their vows. He, too, felt retrospective. Sad, even. He wished his ma and pa could be here, not to mention his cousin who was more like a sister than a cousin. But he had to believe they were watching down from heaven and smiling.

Mrs. Gordon had arranged for some of her womenfolk to be there at the church, and Pastor Stevens, of course, would officiate. It

was all good. The ceremony was special, but the promises he was about to make were more important than the pomp and circumstance. He glanced at his bride again. She had focused her gaze straight ahead. He would mean every word uttered during these nuptials. He was the luckiest man in the world.

He could only hope she felt the same about him.

# Chapter Three



Polly couldn't believe how nice the church had been decorated for this impromptu wedding ceremony. Flowers had been gathered and tied with lovely ribbons to each pew down the center aisle. Candles were lit and placed along the altar with an arrangement of the same flowers and ribbons around each one. It was lovely.

This gentleman, Riggins Tanner, to whom she was about to commit her life, seemed extremely kind. He said he was a tanner by trade and name. He had a successful business here in Denver and was willing to provide for her. How willing would he be to leave Denver and his successful business behind to go back to Fort Collins with her to reclaim her father's ranch?

She hadn't thought the plan through to this end. How could she convince him to go to Fort Collins before next Wednesday? Would he stand up to Edgar Wolfe? Or would he renege on their marriage once he realized she had married him under the pretense of escaping a last-minute, life-changing clause in a will. Would he ask her own lawyers for an annulment since he was standing in their office, assuming she could get him there in the first place?

She made up her mind at that moment to remain chaste even though they were about to be wed. That way, Mr. Tanner would have a legal right to an annulment, if he wanted one, and would not be able to claim she tricked him into a marriage under false pretenses for her own selfish means.

Some woman began playing a piano. Mrs. Gordon gestured for Polly to walk forward. Her feet tangled as she obeyed, causing her to trip, stumbling forward, rather than gliding as she had envisioned. Mr. Tanner lunged to catch her from falling. Embarrassment filled her cheeks with heat. She knew she was nearing the same color as her dress. She smiled appreciatively and regained her balance.

Continuing to hold on to his arm, she walked the two more steps

to stand in front of the pulpit. Pastor Quinn Stephens, she had been introduced to the clergy earlier, gave them both a look of consternation and began what seemed like a memorized sermon on making the decision to enter into the holy sanctity of marriage.

“God, forgive me,” she thought as she tried to smile at Mr. Tanner. He, too, looked flushed and had a slight tremble in the hand that held hers. The pastor droned on, but his words faded from Polly’s hearing. Guilt and shame drowned out what were probably lovely words about marriage and forming a union before God and these witnesses.

It was God she was the most worried about. Would He forgive her for using this stranger in this way? Would He bless their union, despite the reason for it? If He turned against her, and she ended up married to Edgar Wolfe— she just couldn’t imagine the Good Lord doing such a thing to her— but if He did, she would end everything. Why not? Everyone she held dear was already in heaven, except Willow and Red. Would she even be allowed in Heaven if she took her own life?

“Oh, Dear Lord,” she prayed to herself. “Please let this plan work out and forgive me for deceiving this nice man into marrying me.”

“Ahem!” The pastor cleared his throat, bringing her attention to the two men standing in front of her.

“Oh, I’m sorry, what?”

The pastor smiled and repeated his words. “I asked if you come freely, of your own will to marry this man?”

Polly swallowed and crossed her fingers on the hand that was not being held by her future husband. “Yes. I do.”

The pastor continued. Before long he announced they were Man and Wife and then he said the words she dreaded the most. “You may kiss the bride!”

Polly sucked in her bottom lip as Mr. Tanner leaned down to her. His lips were puckered, ready to have that first kiss. She stared at his pushed-out lips and quickly swerved to kiss them as quickly as possible and back away. She smiled awkwardly through heaving breaths, why was her heart pounding so hard?



Mr. Tanner looked confused, but held her hand up, and the women who were there cheered. Even Mrs. Gordon wiped a tear and shouted, “Yay!”

Polly swallowed hard. “All right.” She thought to herself. “Now to convince him we need to go to Fort Collins right away.”

[OBI]



Riggins was startled by her quick and sudden peck on his lips. It was so similar to his cousin’s kiss that for a moment he forgot this was the seal of a lifetime. Should he spit over his shoulder?

He had hoped for so much more at this moment. But seeing how this was an impromptu marriage, and he hardly knew this woman, he could understand her trepidation to perform such an intimate gesture, especially in front of all those people who were strangers to her. In time, she would grow fonder of him, and then they would enjoy the pleasurable exchanges of a married couple.

He rather hoped it didn’t take her long. He already had stirrings in his heart for her and a tempting desire to take her straight to his bed. It was his legal right, after all. A mental image of himself forcing her into his bed flashed in his mind. Disgust shivered down his spine. No, he’d never do such a thing.

He would be patient. He knew better than to force himself on her. It was something Mrs. Gordon had spoken to him about. It was an uncomfortable conversation for both of them. “A marriage-upon-arrival would be a marriage of convenience until it wasn’t.” Mrs. Gordon had explained.

His bride needed time to gain his trust, to feel comfortable and safe with him. He vowed to prove himself trustworthy and he looked forward to when that time would come. She was so beautifully poised and lovely to look upon. His body ached for her, even now.

This was something he’d never felt before— certainly not with his cousin.

“Shall I show you our home?” He asked as they rushed from the church into the sunlight.

She hesitated, then nodded. “That would be nice.”

He escorted her to the buggy that was theirs until evening. Once she had settled, he joined her on the bench and clicked the horse into motion. A clanging and scraping sound caught his attention behind them. Riggins turned to see several strings of tin cans and old shoes dragging from the backend of the buggy. He glanced at Mrs. Gordon's smiling face as she and the others waved goodbye.

A chuckle escaped his mouth. Polly looked at him inquisitively. He shoved a thumb over his shoulder. "They tied cans and shoes to the buggy."

"Oh." She giggled with a shrug. "It's for good luck, then."

"I reckon." He thought a minute. "But... I already got my fair share a good luck." He smiled at her and returned his eyes to the road ahead.

"Really? How's that?" She asked sweetly.

He looked at her, determining if she really didn't know. "I'm the luckiest man around. Got a beautiful woman as my wife..."

She blushed. Her eyes dropped to her lap. "Oh." She rung her hands. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He replied, out of habit, but he meant it. Every word.

He drove to the front of his shop and reined the horse to a stop. "Welp, this is my shop and up there." He pointed at the second story windows. "Is our apartment. I hope you like it."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," she said, but she looked like she had more to say. Why was she restraining herself from speaking her mind? He'd rather know what she was thinking than to guess. Mainly, because he expected her to turn tail and run any minute as he revealed more about himself and his way of living. Did she hate the small apartment, without even seeing it? "Someday, I'll buy us some land, if you want, and build us a fine house. Would you like that?"

"Um." She looked up again at the windows. "Sure."

He crawled out of the buggy and walked around to help her down. This time, he pulled her trunk from the boot and dragged it along with them. Placing his free hand at the back of her waist, he guided her to the shop door. Unlocking the door, he indicated the

staircase to her immediate left. She began to climb while he tugged her trunk along behind. "Is this everything?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon." She turned on the landing, gazing at him with those dark eyes and furrowed brow. He thought he saw fear in her eyes, but wasn't sure. Why was she so afraid of him?

"I just mean, it seems like a small trunk. Is this all of your belongings?"

"Um, no." She moved to stand at the door. It was a short landing and slight hall before the apartment entrance. He stepped around her, leaving the trunk on the landing, and put his arm around her shoulder. The other arm he placed at about her knees and lifted her into a cradling position.

She squealed in surprise.

Fumbling from under all the fabric of her skirt, he opened the door, and pushed it open with his foot. "Welcome home, Mrs. Tanner."

He smiled into her eyes. Their faces were but inches apart. His heart sped up and he once again wanted to kiss her. But Mrs. Gordon's caution to take it slow and let her feel safe before he became her husband in the true sense of the word. He held himself back from a kiss and stepped over the threshold.

"Thank you, Mr. Tanner." She said with a giggle in her voice. Had the fear finally faded from her dark eyes? Maybe a little.

He set her on her feet. "So, if you want, you can settle in, unpack your trunk, and then we can walk down to Pearl's Diner for supper."

She looked at him with surprise. "Oh. Yes. Well. I'm really hungry, perhaps we can just shove my trunk inside and go eat now."

"That sounds all right to me. If you're sure that's what you want." He replied, moving to get the trunk inside his apartment. *Their* apartment, he corrected himself.

"Would you like a tour." He gestured to the space.

"Yes, of course." She giggled.

He liked... no, he *loved* the sound of her happiness. Or was it mere amusement? Either way, he enjoyed hearing it. "Well, this is the parlor and over there, where the Franklin stove is, is the kitchen. I can

put up more shelves if you need them. With just me here, I generally eat at the diner.” Suddenly, for the first time, the apartment seemed woefully inadequate.

“Well, the bedroom is this way.” He took a step, but she didn’t move. He paused, too. Reconsidering the implications beyond that door. “But... we can see that later. Look.” He ran his fingers through his hair. His nerves were on edge and even he felt uncomfortable. “I realize this is brand new for us both. We, well, we don’t gotta take to sleeping together right away. You can have the bedroom and I can sleep on the divan. I fall asleep out here a lot. I like to read, you see, and—”

“That’s very kind of you.” She now moved to peek into the bedroom. Letting her eyes move left and right, she seemed pleased with it. “I’ll just move my trunk in here for now and then we can go eat.”

“All right.” He blocked her from grabbing the trunk. She looked startled, as if he were about to hit her or something. It broke his heart to see such fear in her eyes.

“I’ll move it for you,” he said as gently as he could and took hold of the handle to slide it into the room. Once set inside the room, he brushed his hands as if they were dusty and closed the door. “So, the diner is just a few blocks. You’ll really like their selections. Miss Pearl is the best cook around.”

Polly nodded. “That’s good, because I’m afraid I’m not much of one. Willow did all the cooking back home. I just helped occasionally.”

“Who’s Willow?”

Polly seemed to stiffen. “She’s the woman who raised me. Her husband is Ruairi O’Byrne, he goes by Red, they are employees of my father. Well... they were.” She looked sad. “They are like family to me. Especially, now that my father has passed.”

Her voice faded to where Riggins barely heard the last few words. It must have been recent that her father died. She seemed so acutely emotional about it.

He knew how it felt to not want to say it, let alone tell anyone

about the death of a loved one. His parents had been gone these seven years, and his cousin, five, but it still stung his heart to think about their passing.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he said at last.

She shrugged. “Thank you.”

Awkward silence filled the apartment like thick smoke from a stove pipe needing unclogging. Riggins sucked in a lungful of air and blurted. “Well, let’s get going.”

She jerked at the sound of his voice, then nodded.

He escorted her by putting his hand on her back, down the stairs and onto the boardwalk. The sensation of touching her in this way was the best thing he’d felt in a long time. He could really get used to this.

They walked slowly. She seemed to enjoy looking at the buildings, so he didn’t rush her. “This is called the Depot District,” he explained.

“Oh, it’s not Denver City?”

“Well, yes, it is, but this *area* is known, I guess I should say, as the Depot District.”

“I see.” She continued to look right and left as they walked. “Because it’s near the train depot?”

“I suppose so. I never really thought about it.” He chuckled.

She smiled and everything seemed perfectly right with the world. Riggins puffed out his chest a little as they walked. He and his wife were going to supper.

Once they were seated at Pearl’s Diner, had given the waitress their order, and received iced tea for drinks, Riggins leaned back in his chair. “So, tell me about yourself.”

Her eyes widened and he thought he saw tears pooling again along her bottom eye lashes. He leaned forward and laid his hand over hers. “It’s all right. We have time. You don’t have to tell me anything until you’re ready.”

A wave of relief washed over her face, and she sipped her tea. “Thank you. I’m not real sure where to begin with me. I come from Fort Collins. It’s a town built beside and named after a military fort.

My daddy owned a horse ranch and we bred mostly to the needs of the calvary. It's named the Rafter-A Ranch, and our brand looks like this." She tried to form her fingers like a roof over the letter A, but it was impossible to make the entire thing. She gave up and continued. "We raise fine looking quarter horses, mostly, but we gentle wild mustangs, too. The local cowboys like them. I love our ranch. It's a profitable business, especially right next to a military facility like Fort Collins."

Riggins smiled. Somehow he'd said the right thing to put her mind at ease and she was opening up to him. How wonderful. He enjoyed the sound of her voice even more than to hear her story. Her father's horse ranch sounded like a really peaceful life.

Too bad Riggins was so very well established here in Denver. Being a fourth-generation tanner had been profitable for him and he couldn't imagine doing anything else or living anywhere else.

"So, I was wondering." Polly said just as the waitress brought them their plates piled high with roast beef, gravy, mashed potatoes and turnip greens. "Did you have any sort of" —she swallowed, and watched the waitress slip away— "honeymoon in mind?"

Riggins swallowed his bite of roast and potatoes put together on his fork and nearly choked. In fact, he did cough. Quickly grabbing his tea, he washed the food down and cleared his throat. "I-uh, well, I— what did you have in mind?"

"Well—" She smiled and lowered her eyes coyly.

A sensation shot through Riggins body like a bolt of lightning. At least she was thinking about the wedding night's rite of passage.

She continued. "To be honest, I have some unfinished business back in Fort Collins... and I was thinking... if you want to, we could go back there. I could show you my home and where I'm from. You could meet the O'Byrnes, and I could tend to my business, and then we could decide what to do next."

Riggins slowly nodded. "Well... I don't see why not."

She smiled, but there was pain in her eyes. "Good." She struggled to smile. "Could we take the train back tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow!" Riggins nearly choked again. "Uh, well. Let me sort

out some things at my shop first, then, I'd say we could leave Tuesday."

"Tuesday?" She bit her lip. "All right. That will still work. Hmm, Tuesday." She seemed to fade into her own thoughts as she picked at her food.

"Is your roast all right?" Riggins watched her with concern. He wished he could crack open her thoughts and know what was going on in that head of hers.

"Oh, yes. As you said, Miss Pearl is a wonderful cook."

"Actually, I suppose, it's *Mrs.* Pearl. She's married."

"Oh. I see. And yet, she runs a diner?" Amazement shone in Polly's eyes. It was a nice change from the fear or deep concern he had been observing in them since she arrived.

"Yes, cooking for others seems to be a passion of hers and her husband approves wholeheartedly. Just think of the benefits, too. He can come have a hot meal anytime of the day and she can serve it to him without much fuss."

Polly laughed. Riggins laughed with her. How he loved to see this side of her personality. There was so much trepidation in her, he could tell, but once in a while, when her joy shone through, it made him desire to always make her laugh. How could he resolve all the turmoil in her heart so she could be happy all the time?

Their laughter faded, and they finished eating their meal. Full as a tick, he paid Pearl at the counter and thanked her for a lovely meal.

"Is this your new wife?" Pearl asked kindly. Like her name, her pale skin blended with her nearly stark-white hair as she smiled graciously to Riggins and his bride. Pearl wasn't a busy-body like so many in the depot district and he proudly introduced Polly to her.

"Yes, Mrs. Pearl Preston, this is my wife, as of this very afternoon, Polly Ashburn— I mean Tanner." He chuckled. "I'm not yet used to saying that."

Polly blushed and kindly extended her hand to Pearl. Polly's hand looked sun-kissed compared to Pearl's even though Polly had obviously taken precautions to cover up when outdoors. "It's very nice to meet you. Supper was just wonderful."

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” Pearl smiled sweetly. “I hope to see you again real soon.”

“You can count on it.” Riggins said, then paused. “I mean, my apartment stove is so small, it will probably be easier on my bride if we come here to eat.”

Polly pursed a smile. “I could never serve a meal as delicious as this. I’m positive we will continue my husband’s habit of dining here.”

Pearl smiled. “Well, all the better for me. I would miss not having my number one customer in here every evening.” She winked at Riggins. “But if you want to know some of my recipes, I don’t mind sharing.” This time she winked at Polly.

Polly tipped her head. “That’s very generous of you. I’ll take you up on that offer.”

Riggins guided his wife out of the diner. The more he got to know his wife, the more he was pleased Mrs. Gordon had chosen her for him. She was gracious and poised, and the prettiest woman in the state of Colorado.

How lucky was he?



## Chapter Four



"Mr. Tanner?" Polly posed the question as they walked home from the diner.

"Yes, Mrs. Tanner?" He grinned.

She paused, gazing at him incredulously. "Yes, I suppose we should address one another by our Christian names?"

"I would like that." Riggins replied with a smile. She returned his gesture of warmth and started over. "Riggins? Could we stop by the telegraph office? I'd like to send a wire... aler— er, letting my family know we will be returning Tuesday."

He placed his free hand over hers at his elbow and gave a nod. "If you wish."

Again she smiled. He was such a gentle soul. Would he be able to stand up against Edgar Wolfe's aggressive behavior? Perhaps he wouldn't need to. With any luck, just the fact that they were married would be enough to take the steam out of Mr. Wolfe's engines and send him packing. She nodded. "I do wish."

"It's this way." He gestured at an intersection for them to turn left. "Just a block over."

"How convenient this Depot District has everything within a short walk."

"Pretty much." Riggins seemed taller as he spoke of his area of Denver. "And what isn't can be reached by horse and buggy, which I rent at the livery... over there." He drew in a breath of air. "Which reminds me. I need to return ours this evening."

"Why don't you take care of the horse and buggy while I go send my wire, we can meet back here and walk home."

Riggins looked at her oddly. "I don't mind escorting you to the telegraph office and then returning the horse and buggy. We don't have any pressing plans to return home to, do we?"

"No." She almost pulled away from his elbow. What did he

mean? He hadn't changed her mind about their sleeping arrangements. Had he? "I just thought we could hit two birds with one stone and arrive home sooner... to-to relax. It's been a long day."

"Oh!" Riggins squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry, Polly. I didn't think about you being tired. Of course." His eyes darted ahead and then back. "The telegraph office is just ahead, see the wooden sign hanging over the door? I'll hurry and get the horse and buggy back to the livery and come find you. Please wait for me at the office."

"All right." Polly agreed. Good. Now she could concentrate on what to say in her wire without fear that Riggins would question her motives.

They separated. She hurried to the office, slipping into the door, and approached the high counter. An elderly woman busied herself behind it.

"I'd like to send a wire, please." Polly announced her presence.

"Yes ma'am." The elderly woman licked the pad of her thumb and reached under the counter to pull out a piece of paper and a pencil. "Just write down what you want it to say, and my husband will tap it out for ya."

"Thank you." Polly took the pencil and lifted it to her lip. What to say? She put the pencil to paper and wrote, "Coming home. Plan complete. Meet W at Law Office."

She lifted her head and read through what she had written. Yes, that would do. She handed the paper to the woman who had busied herself with something behind the counter. "Here's what I need sent."

The woman looked it over and tallied her cost. "Do you have money, dear? Or are we putting this on your husband's bill."

"My hu— no, I have money."

"All right." She told Polly the amount. Polly nodded and pulled the money from her reticule. "This should cover it."

The woman looked at the coins, realizing Polly had given her a little extra. "Oh, this is too much, dear."

"No, no. I'm giving you a little more... for your discretion. I'd appreciate you keeping this between us."

The woman drew her head back and puckered her mouth. "Well!

Discretion is our business. What comes across this counter ain't nobody's business but the customer's."

"Good. Let's keep it that way." Polly hated being so direct, but she could not afford to find out later that the woman was the hub of the Depot District's gossip line. If she was wrong, she'd apologize at a later date, assuming she ever returned to this area again.

"Now, I need to sit here and wait for my husband. He said he'd meet me here. Is that all right?"

The woman's face softened.

"Of course. A lovely woman such as yourself shouldn't be gallivanting around the streets at dusk. Who'd you say your husband was?" Her brows lifted curiously.

"I didn't say." Polly closed her eyes. There was no need to continue to be rude to the woman. "I am married to Riggins Tanner."

"Oh!" The woman grinned from ear to ear. "Ol' Riggins found him a wife, did he? I suppose Mrs. Gordon helped him arrange things. She's such a dear. Her matches have been a hundred percent, I've heard."

"Yes, well." Polly stepped back, wondering if her first instincts were more accurate than she'd have liked. "I'll just wait over here. All right?"

The woman waved a dismissive hand. "Of course, dear. I'll just hand this over to my husband and get it sent right away."

Polly heard the woman speaking in a low tone to the man farther back from the counter and then she heard the familiar tap-tap-tip-tap of the telegraph machine. She turned her attention to the window and watched for Riggins to arrive.

Suddenly, she felt vulnerable and wished he'd hurry along. She glanced at the woman who had resumed her position at the high counter, reading a newspaper. The door opened, causing a bell to ring. Polly glanced up to see who was entering, to see Riggins.

A sigh of relief escaped her mouth before she could control herself. He hadn't taken nearly as long as she thought he might. Thank Goodness.

"Are you all done?" he asked.

She glanced at the woman and nodded toward Riggins.

“Good, let’s get going, then.”

She put her hand through his elbow. Clinging to him helped her nerves settle down.

“So, your family will meet us at the depot?” he inquired.

“No, not at first.”

He walked silently for a few minutes. “Then, what did you wire them about?”

Polly jerked her eyes to meet his. “I, well, I told them we’d take care of my business first, which is Wednesday, and then we’d come out to the ranch to let everybody know— er, introduce you to everybody.”

“Let everybody know what?” Riggins pressed.

Polly took a deep breath. “That I have married and brought my new husband home to meet everybody.” She loathed the false glee in her voice. Was Riggins fooled by her ridiculous performance?

“Oh, sure. Of course. I suppose I got a little confused at first.” He chuckled nervously.

Polly smiled. “I’m sorry. I’m very tired. Perhaps I’m not making sense.”

“Sure. Let’s get you home so you can rest. We can discuss everything tomorrow.”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Yes. tomorrow.” A yawn took over her mouth and she covered it with her gloved hand. “Excuse me!”

He chuckled and continued toward his shop. They climbed the stairs, and he opened the door with less pomp and circumstances this time. She went straight to the bedroom and turned to see him behind her. “Well, good night, Mr— um,” She smiled. “Riggins.”


“Good night, Polly.”

She closed the door. Sensing his disappointment, she had to admit her own as well. He was very handsome. She had been quite lucky to be paired with such an attractive man. His occupational requirements had developed his physique into a toned and muscular frame. It was very pleasant to hold his elbow and feel the ribbon of strength in his arm. Perhaps being married to this stranger would not

be so bad, once they settled into a life without the threat of her ranch being taken away from her. Assuming Riggins decided to stay with her once he knew the whole truth about why she married him in the first place.

Surprisingly, sleep came quickly. Perhaps she was as exhausted as she had said.

[OBI]



Anticipating their trip back to Fort Collins in a few days, Polly had to keep busy. But there was nothing for her to do to occupy her time. She accompanied Riggins in his routine of opening shop, putting on coffee, and checking the many vats in the back room. She found a stool and sat to one side, out of his way, so she could simply watch him work.

A very hairy man came into the shop first thing that morning. His long hair and beard revealed nothing but two eyes and a bulbous nose. He had a mound of furs over the shoulder of his fur coat. Although it was very pleasant and warm in Denver City, the mule outside looked wooly, like the man. Had he trapped all these hides up in the mountains?

Riggins assessed the furs and paid the man. The mountain man never said a word, just communicated with grunts and pointing. Riggins offered his customer a cup of steaming hot coffee, which he gulped down like it was iced tea. Polly sat on one side of her husband's shop, fascinated by his smooth transaction with the seemingly mute and feral individual.

Afterward, Riggins meticulously checked the several vats with hides at various stages of being processed. He talked to her as he pulled the wet furs from the liquid. She learned the process by him showing her the differences in the vats and telling her the contents and stages of each.

She was curious what he did as a tanner. Having received leather goods of all sorts for the men and herself at the ranch: gloves, chaps and vests, saddles and reins, and what not, she was amazed to watch how it transitioned from fresh hides to leather goods. Several of her

riding skirts were made from brushed suede. That, too, was an interesting process. She'd never witnessed the making of leather and had a better appreciation for everything the ranch and she used.

Riggins seemed very adept in his skills as he went about drying, processing, and stretching the hides. She was enthralled with watching him. Perhaps one day, he'd teach her these techniques and she could work alongside him.

Whoa! She chastised herself. What was she thinking? Riggins might return from Fort Collins to this shop to do his tanning business, but she was going home and taking her rightful place on the ranch. Breeding horses and supplying the Fort with fine steeds for their calvary, that was her job now that her father had died. Once she cleared up this mess with Edgar Wolfe and had him out of her hair, she had no need for—

What was she thinking? She shook her head. She was married in the eyes of God and those women who witnessed their ceremony. While this marriage was the means in which to thwart Mr. Wolfe's efforts to take over her daddy's ranch, it was still a marriage. She looked at Riggins, who carefully lifted a wooden bar with wet pieces of fur hanging over it from a vat and examined wthem intently. He might choose to stay at the ranch with her. He had said her home sounded like a peaceful existence.

Could she persuade him to stay?

There was the other possibility that kept tormenting her as well. Once he realized she'd married him for the sole purpose of breaking Mr. Wolfe's claim on her ranch, he might request an annulment and leave her for good. She'd thought that from the beginning, before coming here. Hadn't that been her reasoning for making sure they didn't— well, she wanted to give him a way out, if he wanted one.

He smiled at her. She smiled back. He had no idea the turmoil in her mind. Or the deceit in her heart. Guilt swamped her throat and she felt as if she'd breathed hot air, scorching her throat and lungs. Even swallowing didn't help cool the burn. Grabbing for the mug of coffee that had now cooled down, she gulped it down for relief.

Riggins lifted the bar higher, showing her the contents. "You

want to see what I'm doing?"

Draining the coffee mug, she set it down. "Yes."

She hopped off the stool and walked to where he held the long stick with dripping wet furs. It smelled pungent. She wrinkled her nose but listened as he explained what this vat contained and how long these furs needed to stay in this treatment.

The day went by quickly. She'd learned a lot about his trade. A sense of pride grew in her heart for the work he did.

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Tuesday poured through the window with bright sunny light. Polly rose and dressed for travel in her dark-red dress Miss Mary Bell had made. It had been her escape dress and now it was her coming-home dress. She touched up her hair and patted some rouge on her lips.

Riggins was dressed and ready when she entered his parlor. He held a large carpet bag at his side. It looked to be overstuffed with clothes. What all had he packed? Did he plan to stay a while? A butterfly of hope fluttered in her chest.

She dragged her trunk along behind her as she exited the bedroom. Heat filled her face. Would he figure out she had no intention of returning to Denver? "I'm not sure what I'll need, so I just brought the whole thing."

He nodded with an uneasy smile.

## Chapter Five



The train whistle woke Polly. She lifted her head and winced with pain in her neck. It had grown tight as she slept in the stiff-back seat. The swaying and clickety-clack of the train tracks had lulled her into sleep. Stretching to loosen her muscles, she looked out the window, anticipating seeing Red sitting in the wagon, waiting for her.

But he would not be there. Her heart plummeted at the realization this was a different kind of homecoming and she'd told her family she would meet Wolfe at the law office tomorrow.

Riggins stood to retrieve his bag from the compartment above their heads, then stood back with his hand extended to her. She placed her gloved hand into his and allowed him to pull her to her feet. With her large red hat in her other hand, she placed it on her head and strategically inserted the hat pens to stabilize the monstrosity into position. There were no mirrors, she had to rely on the feel of the hat that it looked all right, and, more importantly, helped hide her face.

"Will your family meet us at the depot?" Riggins asked.

Polly glanced up at him, peeking out from under the red fabric and netting. "No. Remember I told you—"

A look of, "Oh, yes," crossed his face as he tilted his head back.

She quickly added. "I have a meeting tomorrow in town and I thought we could stay at the hotel. Is that all right? Saves us traveling back and forth to the ranch and then town in such a short period of time. Besides," She found herself babbling in hopes of convincing Riggins this was a fine plan and very reasonable. "We can dine in the hotel and get a good night's rest before the meeting tomorrow."

"Who is this meeting with?" Riggins nodded, uncertain but in an agreeable gesture.

"My father's lawyers." Her eyes darted to the floor. Could she get away with so little of an explanation? He asked no more questions but put his hand on the back of her waist and guided her to the door



through which they would disembark. Her knees felt weak when he guided her in this way. Strangely enough, she liked the sensation.

He didn't ask for more of an explanation. She wasn't certain how much to tell him now. The element of surprise might be her best bet in keeping things calm between them... until tomorrow when he learned the whole truth.

Relief washed over her as she walked to the opening and looked out across the few people who were gathered to pick up passengers. Wolfe was not among them. A sigh escaped her mouth.

"Are you all right." Riggins cast concerned eyes over her.

"Yes. Just stiff. The walk to the hotel will be just what I need." She descended the steps with the help of a steward and waited for him to join her.

Riggins nodded as he jogged down the steps to stand beside her. "How far is the hotel?"

"Just a few... oh, my trunk! Perhaps we should rent a taxi."

"No." Riggins assured her. "I lugged it up the stairs from my shop, I can manage if the hotel is within walking distance."

"It is, just a few blocks. But—"

He held up his hand to stop her. "I'll be fine."

Polly bit her lip and nodded, but she worried this was pushing the limits of his patience when she needed to be very considerate of him. At least for tonight. Tomorrow, when everything became clear, she could only hope that her consideration for his well-being would prevail in his decision to stay with her. Fingers crossed!

They walked the length of the passenger cars to where the luggage was being off-loaded quickly and headed to the hotel. Once inside, Riggins checked them in, asking for two adjoining rooms, and then requested a bellhop take her trunk to her room. They followed the rail-thin, beanstalk-tall youth up the wide, luxuriously carpeted stairs and waited for him to unlock her door.

Riggins hung back in the hall, watching the bellhop let her enter first. Once the boy emerged from her room she noticed Riggins tossed him a coin and thanked him for his assistance. She smiled. Riggins had a kind and generous nature about him she appreciated but could

he stand up to the bully, Edgar Wolfe?

Polly smiled at him before closing her door. Leaning her head and hand against the obstruction between them, she closed her eyes and prayed her husband would forgive her and want to remain married after tomorrow.

Changed and ready for supper, she opened her door— prepared to walk over and tap on his— to find him poised to tap on hers. “Oh!”

They both jumped back in surprise and chuckled.

“You are ready for our meal?” He looked her over with a smile of approval.

She wore her dark blue dress with the cream colored blouse underneath. It accentuated her dark brown eyes and hair and apparently met with Riggins approval as well. Dark colors still felt appropriate. They gave her a sense of solace. She was in mourning, after all. “Yes, I am rather hungry,” she replied.

He extended his elbow and together they walked downstairs toward the restaurant. However, at the entrance, she paused in the doorway. Glancing around to see if Mr. Wolfe was anywhere. She noted the restaurant was Wolfe-free and took a step to indicate to Riggins she was ready to enter. He followed her subtle lead and guided her to the maitre d’s podium.

“Dinner for two, please.”

Her tummy grumbled as they followed the well-dressed gentlemen to the table he had selected for them. Riggins smiled at her and squeezed her hand, gently. Upon sitting, she couldn’t help but to scan the restaurant patrons once again, to be sure Edgar Wolfe was not in town and, in fact, eating at this very restaurant.

His presence would be disastrous. He’d surely approach Polly and gloat over their meeting tomorrow. He’d learn she was married and the whole ambush at the lawyer’s office would be ruined. Would it give him the advantage she had been wanting over him?

Her tummy clinched and she couldn’t imagine eating anything. Should she just order a sandwich and coffee? Perusing the menu, she opted for a chicken pot pie and hot chamomile tea. Surely that combination would sooth her nervous stomach and heart.

When their meal was served, they ate quietly. The food was delicious as always and Polly could feel the effects of her full tummy pulling her into a drowsy yawn. She did her best to hold it in, but failed. The yawn took over her mouth. All she could do was cover her lips with her hand.

“So,” Riggins finished his last bite of chicken fried steak and wiped his mouth with the linen napkin. “What is this business you have tomorrow?”

Polly swallowed hard. “My father’s will is being executed,” she said flatly.

“Oh!” Riggins cocked his head back, genuinely surprised. “I don’t guess I realized his estate had not been settled.” His brow furrowed but his gaze softened. “When did he pass, again?”

Tears popped into Polly’s eyes before she had the chance to slide behind an emotionless façade. She sucked her lips inward and bit down on them to stay the sob that begged to be released. Her breathing came in jerky intakes. She could not fall apart now!

Closing her eyes, steeling herself, she forced her breathing into a slow, rhythmic intake and release. Finally, she opened her eyes. “Three days before I came to Denver.”

“My goodness.” He reached out and took hold of her hand. Giving it a gentle squeeze. “I had no idea.” His eyes filled with sympathy. “I thought that your father had passed recently by some things you said, but I truly didn’t realize it had been so recent. I’m sorry for your loss.” He scanned her dress as if he were seeing her for the first time. “I get it now, all the dark dresses. You’re still in mourning.”

She forced a brief smile. It was all she could manage. Her heart was pounding, and she felt as if she could not gather enough air in her lungs to satisfy their hunger for more. A sob lingered, impatiently, at the edge of her ability to keep it back, ready to burst forth the minute she loosened her grip on her emotions.

“Well,” Riggins continued. “I’m glad you came to Denver. We are married, now. I will be your strength tomorrow. You may hold my hand the entire time, if you wish. I am honored to be here for you.”

He covered his heart with his hand and bowed his head slightly.

Polly lifted her eyes. Shocked by the sincerity in his. Tears spilled over her lashes. She blinked. He should not be so kind. This was harder, she thought, than if he expressed suspicion and questioned her until she confessed her traitorous plans. Tomorrow, he'd know the whole truth and then he wouldn't feel so congenial about being her husband or standing at her side.

How will Riggins respond when Wolfe explodes over her trickery? Will Riggins tell Edgar Wolfe he can have her, because he didn't want to stay married to a lying, manipulative traitor.

Polly drew in a ragged breath.

"Thank you." She barely managed. The silence between them blanketed over her untold truth and she fought to allow it to remain unspoken. Tomorrow would be different. Tomorrow, he would react differently. She'd deal with whatever came of it then. For now, she'd bask in his kindness, as if his kindness could make everything better. If only it could remain a little longer despite the events of the next day.

[OBI]



Riggins rose the next morning, sensing his wife's nervous disposition. Even in separate rooms, her emotional state of mind was palpable. He wondered if she had slept at all. He had heard her moving around during the night as if she were walking the floor in a worried, fretful pace, back and forth. Had she worked out her concerns in the miles she had paced? What could have her so distraught? How could he ease her mind?

It was reasonable to think that the execution of her father's will was top of the list for her concerns. Leaving her hometown so soon, before the reading, obviously had something to do with resolving an issue only she knew about. Perhaps her father's will demanded she marry upon his death in order to receive his inheritance. That would explain her request for a hurried marriage. But why wouldn't she tell him that was her reason for coming to Denver?

Perhaps it was a trust issue. She didn't know him, he didn't know

her. Mrs. Gordon warned him about that. More than likely Mrs. Gordon had known the details of Polly's request, and made the match based on what she knew about him. A surge of pride zipped through his chest.

It was well known that Mrs. Gordon had a high success rate for matches. Riggins trusted Mrs. Gordon. Therefore, he trusted Polly. And when he took his vow to love, honor, and protect her, he meant it. Whatever it was she faced today, he would protect her to the end, honor her reason for doing what she had, and love her until the day he died. No matter if she was a pauper or a wealthy woman as a result of the execution of this will.

He gave her his heart when he said, "I do." There was nothing on this earth that would ever cause him to ask for it back. Hopefully, with this legal matter out of the way, she would relax and allow herself to feel something for him, other than refuge. Love certainly stirred in his heart for her. He could only hope that it would soon stir in hers and they could move beyond a marriage of convenience.

Dressed, he lifted his bag, and walked down to her door. Giving it a soft rap, he waited for her to open. She looked pale and fidgety. His heart ached to take her into his arms and console her, but instincts told him it was not time. "Shall I take your trunk?"

"Oh." She looked around as if she had forgotten about her luggage. "I asked the bellhop to retrieve it earlier this morning. I've had it sent home."

"Well, that's good. Very efficient of you." He smiled. "So, would you like some breakfast before we go to the lawyer's office?"

She exhaled. "I couldn't." Shaking her head vehemently. "I-I just want to go and get this over with."

"Of course." He extended his elbow and when she placed her hand in the crook, he patted it reassuringly. "Everything's gonna be all right."

She nodded once but remained silent.

"I'm here. Don't worry." He added.

Pursing her lips, she jerked another nod, but she didn't look convinced.

Escorting her down the stairs, he checked them out of their rooms and walked with her onto the boardwalk. He looked up and down the street. "Which way?"

She indicated with a tilt of her head, and he continued to guide her in that direction. He could see where their destiny ended by a painted sign hanging from a hinged, wrought-iron brace so it could swing with the wind. Attorneys at Law. The closer they got to the law office the slower she walked. He let her choose their pace but clung to her hand at his elbow.

A dark gray horse whinnied and stamped its foot at the hitching post in front of the office. Polly stiffened. Did she know this horse and its rider? Was he the reason she was so afraid of this meeting? A sense of protection filled Riggins heart and gut. "Not to worry," he whispered to her as they entered the doors. Ornately etched glass allowed the morning light to spill into the otherwise dark reception area.

"Ah, Miss Ashburn." A slender man stood from his desk as they entered, tilting his head back so as to look through a pair of spectacles balanced on his extensive nose. "They are waiting for you in the office."

She swallowed hard and gave him a nod. Riggins patted her hand.

"Thank you." Riggins said to the man when Polly said nothing.

Slowly, they walked into the designated office. Three men stood upon their entrance. One large, rotund gentleman who sat behind a huge wooden desk. He had bushy, grey sideburns and bushy eyebrows to match, a pin-striped suite that appeared to have been recently tailored for him. An equally large man in a dusty but well fitted, for his size, suit. He had dark, grease-slicked hair, a fresh shave, and a sheen of greed in his eyes. His gaze roved over Polly, even though she had ahold of Riggins arm, as if she were a prize-winning goose on display at the butcher's shop window.

Riggins disliked the man instantly. A third man, a red-haired, freckled-faced man, stood quickly with the others. Concern and then relief filled his face upon Polly's entrance. Polly, too, seemed to relax

a small amount upon seeing the friendly-faced man.

Riggins assumed this had to be Red O'Byrne, the man Polly had spoken of fondly. At least she had a friend present, besides himself, to guard her against anything wrongfully attempted during this proceeding. Riggins had no idea what wrongful things might happen, but by Polly's tense nerves and extreme fear before coming here, there had to be something potentially looming in these proceedings.

"Well! Who have we here, Miss Ashburn?" The clean-shaven man bellowed.

Mr. Bushy Sideburns took charge. "Now, Edgar, let's give everyone a chance to introduce themselves, and then we can proceed."

Clean Shaven grunted his impatience and gestured to Riggins to begin.

"I am—"

Polly held tight to his elbow, but lifted her free hand to touch his shoulder, stopping him from speaking. "Please, let me," she said gently.

Riggins closed his mouth.

"This is Riggins Tanner... m-my husband."

The clean-shaven fellow gasped with an incredulous, disbelieving smile, "Wha—?"

"And I am Polly Tanner, his wife." She glared the Mr. Clean Shaven who now looked as if he had sat on some hot coals. His face filled with crimson to the point of almost purple. He snapped around to face the Irishman. "You said she was ill and in her bedroom recuperating!"

The recipient of this wrath just shrugged. "I'm Red O'Byrne, the Ashburn's stable master." A slight smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He sat down as if the clean-shaven fellow had not just accused him of lying about Polly's whereabouts.

The man behind the desk cleared his throat. "I am George Puckett, the late Mr. Ashburn's counsel, and I will be overseeing the execution of his final will and testimony." He sat heavily, the springs on his chair protesting under the weight.

"I object!" The clean-shaven fellow refused to sit down. "Where's your proof this man is your husband?"

"Oh, sit down Edgar." Mr. Puckett fussed. "This," Mr. Puckett gestured to the clean-shaven fellow, "In case you haven't figured it out on your own, is Edgar Wolfe. Lance Ashburn's business partner." He chuckled. "And apparently, the one who has the most to lose now that you are here, Mr. and Mrs. Tanner." He sat back with a jovial smile on his broad face.

Riggins pulled his gaze from Mr. Puckett and Mr. Wolfe to his wife, who wouldn't look at him. She stared at her lap, instead. "It's my pleasure to meet you all." Riggins said. "Darling, show them our marriage papers. If it's proof they need, we shall provide."

Polly opened her reticule and pulled out a folded envelope. Handing it to the lawyer, she sat back down again with her eyes focused on her lap. Riggins laid his hand on top of hers and gave it a little squeeze. He had told her he'd hold her hand through this proceeding, if she wanted. He had meant that, too.

Mr. Puckett unfolded, opened, and retrieved the paper from the envelope. He looked it over and laid it down on top of a thicker group of papers. "Well, it looks as though we have a slightly different execution of this will than Mr. Wolfe anticipated." He struggled to hide his mirth, but the quivering smile kept lifting at the corner of his mouth.

"I object!" Mr. Wolfe bellowed. "She can't do this!"

Mr. Puckett smiled, a gold tooth to the side of his mouth shown from between his plump lips. "She can, and she has, Edgar."

"Lance promised me everything!" Wolfe leapt to his feet, pounding his fist on the lawyer's desk.

Polly lifted her head. "He did not! That signature of my father's was on his death bed. He probably didn't even know what he was signing! He'd NEVER do this to me!"

"Settle down!" Puckett commanded. "I will not have such behavior in my chambers!"

Polly sat back, stiff as a board. Her lip trembled.

Riggins squeezed her hand a little firmer. "What seems to be the



problem, Mr. Puckett?" Riggins asked casually.

He looked at Riggins with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. "Well, Mr. Tanner, it seems Mr. Wolfe was under the impression that upon Lance Ashburn's death, he would inherit the Ashburn Ranch: lock, stock, and barrel; not to mention his daughter's hand in marriage." He glanced down at the marriage certificate. "But... your wife has managed to pull a fast one and gotten herself married to you before the execution of Ashburn's will, which reverses all of the holdings to... her... and you, rather than Mr. Wolfe." He turned his gaze directly onto Polly. "You clever girl."

"NO!" Mr. Wolfe leapt to his feet again. "That's not right! I still get the business and the land!" He pounded his fist on the desk for emphasis.

"No, you don't!" Mr. Puckett said sternly. He glared at Wolfe, until the man eased back into his chair. "You see, the one mistake you made here is coming to me to have these papers drawn up. I made sure there was a way for this poor girl to escape your underhanded confiscation of her father's land and business." He turned a broad smile on Polly. "And she figured it out." He winked at her.

A smile twitched at the corner of Polly's mouth. Riggins pulled his gaze from her to the lawyer. "Well, let's hear how the inheritance is distributed, now that we have the matter of our marriage established."

Polly glanced at him and returned her eyes to her lap. He continued to hold her hand.

"Of course." Mr. Puckett lifted the thicker document and began to read. Wolfe's face grew redder as Puckett continued through each section and paragraph. By the time the final words were read and the paper was pushed out for Polly and Riggins to sign, Mr. Wolfe looked like a kettle about to explode.

"Where do I sign?" Wolfe growled.

"Nowhere." Puckett stated. "There's nothing for you to sign for," he said with a little more glee than Riggins thought necessary. There wasn't any reason to rub it in the man's face that he had missed out on this opportunity to take over a thriving horse breeding ranch. Even

if he had obtained that opportunity in a deceitful way.

“But what about our partnership?” Wolfe snarled. “I’m half owner of that horse breeding business. I commissioned the contracts with the army at Fort Collins! I deserve compensation!” He lifted his fist to pound it on the lawyer’s desk, but Puckett managed to reach up and grab hold of Wolfe’s fist before it came down. “That was dissolved upon Lance’s death and his daughter’s marriage. Now, if you want to re-negotiate a partnership or compensation for your investment with Mr. and Mrs. Tanner, I’ll be happy to schedule another meeting with you and them to discuss the terms.” Puckett sat back in his oversized chair and turned to Riggins as if to ask if he wanted to set that meeting.

Riggins turned to look at Polly. She glanced at him but didn’t indicate what she wanted. Riggins turned back to Puckett. “My wife and I need to discuss it. I’m not sure what we want to do as of right now. We will let you know, either way. Is that satisfactory?”

Out of the corner of Riggins eye, he saw the smile that Red was fighting behind a hand that he casually held over his mouth, as if he were resting his chin. Riggins liked Red and looked forward to getting to know the man better. He focused his attention on the lawyer.

“That’s very satisfactory, Mr. Tanner.” Puckett said as he gathered the papers and handed Polly the marriage certificate and the envelope from which she had it stored. She accepted it with a small smile and shoved them both in her reticule.

Riggins turned to O’Byrne. “May I assume you have adequate transportation to take us to the ranch, Mr. O’Byrne?”

“My name is Ruairi, it means Red in my former country of Ireland. Most folks ‘round here call me Red, it’s what I prefer. Only me wife calls me *Ruairi*, makes me feel like I’m in trouble, it does.” He chuckled. “I’d be honored to have you just call me Red, Mr. Tanner.” Red said with a nod. “And may I say, thank you.” He extended his hand, and they shook.

Riggins turned to the lawyer and shook his hand, he turned then to Mr. Wolfe, who glared at his proffered hand as if it was a venomous snake. He flapped his hands in defeat, dismissing the gesture of

friendship, then turned on his heels and stormed from the room, grumbling as he walked. "You haven't heard the last of me!"

"Let's hope that isn't true," Red said quietly.

Polly lifted her head. Darting her eyes between Red and Riggins. No, she had a pleading look in her eyes. Shaking her head, vehemently, she uttered, "Don't let that man near the ranch, ever again!"

Riggins nodded, but Red touched his arm. "He will need to come at least one more time to get his things."

"All right." Riggins replied. "He can come get his things, but it will be with someone watching his every move. I don't trust him."

"As well you should not," Red agreed. The three of them left the law offices and climbed into a wagon pulled by a mule. "Good to have you home, Miss Polly."

She smiled at him. "It's Missus, now, Red."

"Yes." He turned to Riggins with a grin. "So it is."

Polly turned to Riggins. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He pursed a smile. "But we do need to talk."

Her smile slid from her face and, more importantly, her eyes. It saddened Riggins to his core.

She swallowed hard. "Yes. Of course."

## Chapter Six



Red and Riggins were silent on the ride to the ranch. That suited Polly just fine. She didn't feel like having a conversation now. The plan that she and Willow had schemed in her room just before Edgar Wolfe took her to town to make the appointment with Mr. Puckett had worked. At least it had saved her ranch and her hand in marriage to the greedy snake.

Would Riggins announce his disappointment in her deceit and head back to Denver without her? Would he return to Puckett's office and have a quick annulment drawn up? She had no idea what he was thinking. He had been so casually calm during the execution of her father's will. Was that truly his reaction to all this? Or was it a façade that would soon be cast aside once they were alone in her father's den?

Could she delay that conversation? No, she'd held Riggins in the dark long enough. The sooner they talked about why she had done what she did, the better for everyone concerned. He deserved the whole truth. Once he came to terms with what she had done to save her ranch, let fate land where it may. After all, she had known from the beginning he might choose to leave her. Wasn't that why she had been so adamant about remaining chaste?

Sadly, she folded her hands in her lap and waited until the wagon pulled into the barnyard. Red and Riggins both reached to help Polly down from the bench. Red conceded and backed away to let her husband help her. She smiled at him sheepishly, then opened her mouth to invite him inside.

"Polly!" Willow ran out the back door from the kitchen, halting Polly's words. "You're home!"

Polly turned from Riggins. "Yes."

She hurried to the woman and held her tight in her arms.

Willow fawned over her as if she might be a dream. "You made

it! And everything worked out like we hoped it would?" She glanced at Riggins standing beside the wagon still. "And this... this is your new husband?" Willow stepped gingerly toward him. "Hello. I'm Willow O'Byrne. What's your name?"

"Riggins Tanner, ma'am." Riggins yanked his hat off his head and shook Willow's hand.

"Riggins... Tanner." She looked him over then turned to Polly. "And he's a right strapping young man, isn't he?" Willow laughed. "That matchmaker done real good, didn't she?"

Heat filled Polly's cheeks. "Yes, Willow. She did." Her eyes flitted to Riggins, but she couldn't look him in the eyes. "Riggins, this is Willow... my nan— our housekeeper."

He fidgeted with his hat and smiled. "I took it that she was."

Polly nodded. "Well, let's go inside and have that talk."

"All right" Riggins said solemnly. Nodding to the O'Byrnes to be excused from their presence.

Polly sighed as she looked back at Willow. "We'll be in the den, could you bring some tea and..." She assessed Riggins. "Sandwiches? We haven't had anything since last night at supper."

"Of course." Willow grinned from ear to ear. "Riggins Tanner. My stars."

Polly gestured for Riggins to follow her. She saw out of the corner of her eye he did. She missed him holding her hand for comfort. She could use some comforting still.

Leading him through the kitchen and dining area, down the hall, and into her father's den, she closed the door and turned to face him. The last time she stood here, she was a ball of nerves. Not much had changed. She was as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a rocking chair shop. She inhaled the familiar smells of her father and let them sooth her frazzled nerves. "So..."

"Wait." Riggins entered, rushed to her, and took her by the shoulders. The next thing she knew he kissed her. Stunned, she stiffened, but she liked the way his lips felt on hers. She didn't resist. When he stepped back, she blinked.

"I just wanted to kiss you." He explained. "We never really did

that when we got married.”

She nodded. “Right. So, I suppose I owe you an apology and an explanation.”

He tilted his head. “An apology? Why an apology?”

This gave her pause. She cocked her head back on her shoulders and considered him. “Be-because I-I didn’t tell you the whole truth.”

“Well,” he jabbed his hands into his hair. “No. I suppose you didn’t tell me you came to Denver to get married so that you could save your ranch from that awful Wolfe fellow. But on the other hand, I never asked you why you wanted to get married so quickly, either. So I suppose we are even on that account.”

She stared at him. “So... you’re not angry with me?”

“No.”

Her brows knitted as she considered him further. “Well, if you don’t want to continue our marriage, I underst—”

His lips covered her words. Once she realized what was happening, she kissed him back. Maybe he really didn’t care how or why they had married. She staggered back from him, gasping for air. “You-you really are not angry at me?”

“No.” He chuckled.

“But, we do need to talk,” she said.

“I know, and you’re right.” Riggins nodded. “We need to talk about this ranch and what you want now that you know you’re the rightful owner.”

“Yes.” She couldn’t believe her ears. He truly wasn’t angry.

He sat on a small divan against the bookshelf. “Let’s talk.”

“The thing is—”

“Here you go.” Willow came into the room without knocking and with a tray of tea and sandwiches. “Is there anything else I can get ya?”

“I don’t think so, Willow. Thank you.”

Willow set the tray down and gave Polly another hug. “It’s so good to have you home.”

“Thank you.” Polly pursed a smile.

After Willow left the room, Polly turned back to her husband.

“Riggins, I-I don’t know where to begin.” She collapsed in a chair as if she were facing a reprimand from her father. He would be behind his gigantic desk, with his fingers steepled, glaring at her with those stern eyes.

Riggins rushed to her, kneeling beside the chair unaware of her pretense that her father was present. “Polly, darling. I’m not angry. I’m impressed with your ingenuity and courage to come to Denver, and... marry me, a stranger. That was very resourceful. Now, what do you want to do about the ranch, now that you’ve saved it from the big bad Wolfe?”

She stared at him, what did he mean? “I-I want to take over where my father left off. We have contracts with the Fort, and good breeding stock. I—”

“Oh.” Riggins sat back on his heels. “You want to stay here. Of course you do.” He rose and walked back to the divan. “Of course.” He stared at the floor as if he were thinking this new realization over.

“What did you think?” She asked in a small voice.

His eyes widened and his brow rose. “Well, I sort of thought you had people here, like Red and ranch hands, who would run the ranch now that you’d saved it from Edgar Wolfe, and... you’d come back to Denver with me. I have a thriving business there.”

“Yes. I know you do. Couldn’t you tan hides and make leather goods here?”

“My shop, my business, my home... is in Denver... the Depot District.”

Polly exhaled, felling deflated. “Right.”

She tried to smile but tears filled her eyes instead. “I was really hoping you’d be willing to move here. There’s plenty of out buildings we can convert into a tanner’s shop.”

“Yes, but our home is in Denver.”

“Of course.” She sunk lower in her chair. “Well, I suppose you’ll be wanting an annulment?”

His eyes jerked to meet hers. “An annulment? But if you are not married, can’t Edgar Wolfe claim his rights to the land and... you?”

Polly hadn’t thought about that. “I don’t know. But if—”

“POLLY! WILLOW! FIRE!” Red screamed from outside of the house.

Polly and Riggins leapt to their feet and ran from the den. In the hall, there was no smoke. It wasn't the house, at least not this end of the house. Polly ran to the kitchen, just in time to see Willow running through the back door.

“FIRE!” Someone else yelled from outside. It sounded like Slim, one of the ranch hands. Riggins and Polly ran to the yard.

The barn was a blaze. “Riggins! The horses!” Polly screamed.

He jerked a nod and ran ahead of her into the barn. Ranch hands were tossing buckets of water and dirt at the fiery walls. The pounding of hooves resounded from the road. She turned to see a dark grey horse through the cloud of dust kicked up behind the rider.

“Edgar Wolfe.” She stated unnecessarily.

“That evil man!” Willow growled.

Polly ran to the water trough pulling the scalloped apron from the front of her dress, tore it into four pieces, and dipped them into the water. Wrapping one around her nose and mouth, she handed the other two to Willow and Red. They all ran into the barn.

She found Riggins pulling stall doors open, along with Slim, letting the horses run free. Some of the horses had to be coaxed out and others leapt out the moment the door was pulled. She dodged a terrified equine and ran to Riggins.

“Here!” She handed him the wet cloth. He wrapped it around his face and kept opening stall doors. She, Willow, and Red began doing the same. The horses darted left then right, running into each other, and leaping over benches that had fallen in their way, frantically running from the barn.

Red yelled something.

“WHAT?” Polly yelled back.

“It's empty!” he yelled again. “The barn's empty! GET OUTTA HERE!” A beam fell from the roof. Flames and smoke followed it to the ground. Polly screamed and stumbled back to avoid the fire at her feet.

She looked across the stalls, praying Red was right and all the



horses were safe. Riggins still pulled stall doors open, coughing as he went, and darting inside. He kicked at the straw, verifying it was empty. Was he looking for foals? How astute of him, considering he had not been a horse rancher.

“Let’s go!” She grabbed Riggins’s hand and pulled him from the barn.

They gathered in the barnyard, away from the smoldering flames. “Why would anybody set your barn on fire?” Riggins asked nobody as he held up a burned tin of kerosene. “If Edgar Wolfe wanted the ranch so bad, why would he destroy the barn?”

“Sour grapes.” Polly looked at her husband to see if he understood. When he knitted his brow, she continued. “If he can’t have what he wants, no one can.”

Riggins looked at her incredulously. “Are you serious?”

She nodded.

“Polly’s right.” Red stepped up next to them. “That man has no morals. I never understood why Mr. Ashburn partnered with him in the first place.”

Willow stood beside Polly. “Mr. Ashburn had his reasons.” She mumbled and turned to walk back into the house.

They all watched her walk away. Morose silence hung among them like the dense smoke still spiraling from the embers. Polly coughed, breaking the spell.

“Let’s get inside the house.” She stated hoarsely and coughed again. “Red, have one of the ranch hands ride into town and tell the sheriff what has happened.”

Red nodded and walked to where the men were still tossing sand and dirt on the dying embers. He pulled one man aside and he soon was in the saddle of a quarter horse, racing down the same rode Edgar Wolfe had just trod.

Riggins followed Polly and Red to the house. He, too, was coughing and clearing his throat from the smoke they had inhaled. “He said he’d be back to get his things.” He paused to cough up phlegm cluttering his words. “What gives him the right to burn down your barn?”

Red shook his head. "He thinks he's entitled, I suppose. Some men are like that."

Riggins shook his head. "I just don't get it."

"That's because you're a good man." Red brought his hand down on Riggins shoulder. "And I'm happy to have you in the family, son."

Riggins opened his mouth, but didn't say anything. He shifted his eyes to Polly. She smiled a sad smile and remained silent as well.

She would tell Red that Riggins wasn't going to stay. But not now. Another time. For now, they had horses to round up and a barn to rebuild. Perhaps Riggins would stay long enough to help with that. Then she'd let him go.

He was right about Edgar Wolfe. If she reversed her marriage with an annulment, Mr. Wolfe would jump on the opportunity and stake his claim on everything, including her. A shiver ran down her spine. Would Riggins be willing to remain married, but live separate lives?

What a sad and lonely existence, Polly conceded. But it was better than being married to Edgar Wolfe.

[OBI]



Red hitched up the wagon and mule and whistled for a ranch hand to go with him.

"I'll go with ya, Red." Riggins volunteered. The other hands turned back to what they had been doing to clear out burned lumber.

Polly smiled. She had been right. He would stay for a while and help rebuild. By this afternoon, they'd be back with new wood and start rebuilding the barn in the morning.

Polly and Willow had dressed for dirty work in old riding skirts, old blouses, boots, and leather gloves. They had covered their hair in bandanas to keep it clean. They joined those who remained behind to clear out the ruined lumber and salvage what might be less damaged.

Soon, they had separate piles of keep, destroy, and somewhere in between. Equipment and tools reeked with smoke, but that which was still usable was put in the pile to keep, and that which was ruined beyond repair was put in the pile to be destroyed. Later, a bonfire

would be lit to remove what couldn't be kept.

It was sad work, but necessary. The horses whinnied and ran about the field, coming to the fence to watch them work. They were curious and ready to be back in their stalls. Polly walked to them at the fence, rubbing their long faces and scratching behind their ears like she did when they hung their heads over the stall doors.

"It's all right. We'll get you a new barn soon. Go run and play. It's all right." She cooed.

The afternoon sun rode across the sky in a hot ball of flames, as what had been a beautiful equestrian barn was reduced to piles of rubble and wooden planks. By mid-afternoon the mule and wagon kicked up dust on the road toward the house. Riggins and Red were back.

Polly's heart sped up, seeing them coming toward her. Did Willow feel this way when Red returned to the ranch? Polly stretched her back, and paused from her work, to enjoy this new sensation of pining for her husband. She cared for Riggins. She'd even missed him while he was gone these few hours. How would she get along once he went back to Denver for good?

Sighing heavily, she walked toward the wagon as Red pulled up closer. It was empty. "Where's the new lumber?"

"Had to order it." Red told her. "Denver Lumber Mill will send it by rail in a day or two.

"Oh." Polly sighed. "Well, back to it, I suppose." She turned and Willow followed her to clearing the burned debris. The hands continued with their work. It was a synchronized workforce like the bees in the clover field, everyone had a job to do and went to it. Polly stood beside Riggins and helped ease charred wood from the collapsed building.

Riggins worked silently, as did everyone else. There was no need to talk. The work was exhausting enough without adding conversation to it. By nightfall the lumber laid in sorted piles. Everyone moved to the chuckwagon that had been pulled up closer to the ranch house. Cookie had three pots of coffee boiling and a big cast iron Dutch oven of stew.

Polly and Riggins stood in line along with Willow and Red, and sat with the men around the bonfire that had been lit while they got their plates of food and tin cup of coffee. The glow of firelight illuminated their faces, and somehow, despite the disastrous fire, it felt good to sit here with Riggins. Polly scraped her enamel plate with her oversized spoon, getting the last of the stew into her mouth. Campfire stew was delicious after a long day of hard work.

She and Riggins followed the other field hands and placed their plates, flatware, and cups in a large tub for washing. They each thanked Cookie, who shooed their offers to help clean up, sending everyone to their separate beds. The men to the bunk house, and Polly, Riggins, Willow, and Red to the house.

Tomorrow would begin bright and early, and everyone was expected to pitch in. There was more debris to clear away and preparation for the new barn would entail digging trenches for a foundation and sorting through what could be reused that survived the fire.

Polly yawned as she climbed the stairs. "I believe you are all set in the guest room at the end of the hall."

Riggins paused with her at her bedroom door. "Thank you. I-uh, was wondering..." He ran his hand through his dust covered hair.

Polly turned from her door to address him. "Um?"

"Well, since the cat is out of the bag, and all, I was wondering if you might be ready to..."

"The way I see it." Polly swallowed hard. "We have agreed to remain married, even though you will return to Denver. So, I don't see any merit to risking me getting pregnant and left alone here to raise our child. Do you?"

"Oh, no. Of course not." His demeanor slammed into confused sadness. "Of course not." He repeated. "All right... well, good night, Polly. I'll see you at breakfast."

"Good night, Riggins. Sleep well."

"Uh, you, too." He uttered as he turned, but immediately turned back. "There's just one more thing..."

"Wh—" His lips covered her word. She stepped back into her

room to put space between herself and Riggins, but he followed, pulling her against his taut body. Her arms automatically wrapped around his wide, strong back. Her body melded into his.

“I believe, Mrs. Tanner, that I have changed my mind, and it isn’t all right. No, it isn’t all right at all!” Passionately he tasted her mouth, trailing hot kisses over her jaw and down her neck to her collar bone.

She moaned. “I think... I love you.”

“I know I love you, Polly.” Riggins uttered.

Together they found what God had intended between a man and a woman in the true sanctity of marriage. Their love bonded them for life. Exhaustive sleep enveloped them in a restful embrace like none other.

The next morning when she woke, she realized Riggins lay behind her. His arm rested over her waist, and his body conformed to hers, like spoons in a drawer. She smiled. Although she felt stiff, sore, and groggy from the hard, laborious work yesterday clearing the burned barn, she felt exhilarated. They were married, in every sense of the word. Never, had she felt so much love for another person as she did for this man sleeping behind her. Gently, she lifted his arm and slid out from the bed.

He stirred and rolled over. “Oh, don’t go.”

“We got a lot of work to do today. Willow and Red are expecting us.”

“Yeah, but—” He opened one eye and smiled. “You’re so beautiful.”

“Stop!” She giggled and grabbed her dressing gown to hide behind the quilted fabric. “Come on. We are needed outside.”

Quickly, he grabbed his clothes from the floor, slid into his pants, and rushed down the hall where his clean clothes were waiting in the carpet bag on the guest bed.

Polly dressed in her room. She couldn’t stop smiling. Did this mean he would stay in Fort Collins? She halted, with her older skirt midway to her waist. What if he still intended to go back to Denver? Worse yet, what if she was pregnant? Her heart sank to her knees with

the thought. Could she raise a child by herself? Willow and Red would help, of course, but would that be the same as having her husband at her side?

They needed to discuss this. Sooner than later. She needed to know exactly what his intentions were. And how she fit in with his plans.

# Chapter Seven



Sheriff Ron Hinkle stood in the yard when Polly walked out of the kitchen. She held a biscuit dripping with butter and jam and cup of coffee. Anxious to talk to Riggins, who had not shown up at the table for breakfast, she decided to carry her meal with her outside to see if work had begun.

She found Riggins. Her heart leapt at the sight of him standing with Red, Willow, and the sheriff. Red was explaining what had happened to the barn. He pointed to the road, indicating they had seen Edgar Wolfe riding away from the fire.

As she walked closer to them, she could make out the words being spoken. "You say you saw Wolfe's grey gelding, but did you actually see Wolfe riding him?" the sheriff asked.

"Well, no," Red admitted. "But who else could it be, Sheriff?"

"Literally, anybody. That's the problem." The sheriff looked over the cleaned-out area where the new barn would soon stand.

One of the ranch hands galloped toward the men in the yard. "The bunkhouse office is cleared out!" He reined his horse to a halt near Red. "Must have happened sometime during the night."

"See there!" Red turned to Sheriff Hinkle. "That man just comes and goes like he still lives here! You've gotta arrest him!"

An uneasy feeling sucker punched Polly in the midriff. Edgar Wolfe came back to the ranch in the middle of the night and took his belongings. She hadn't heard any riders in the night. Guilt and embarrassment swamped her heart, recalling what had occupied her attention last night. How had Mr. Wolfe managed to sneak onto the land and into the bunkhouse without being detected by any of the hands who slept there?

"I can't arrest a man for taking his own belongings. As I understand it, he told you all he would do that."

"Yeah, but he didn't say nothing about lighting the barn on fire!"

Willow chimed in.

“Now, we can’t prove he did that, Willow.” Sheriff Hinkle said calmly.

“It don’t take no genius to figure that one out.” Willow retorted.

“So,” Riggins spoke up for the first time. “What we need to do is prove whoever rode that grey gelding away from the fire was the same person who set the fire, and to identify who that person actually was?”

The sheriff turned to Riggins in surprise. “That’s right. Excuse me, but you are...?”

“I’m Riggins Tanner, Sheriff. I’m Polly’s husband.”

Polly’s heart swelled with a sensation she could only identify as pride. She couldn’t hear it enough. This was her husband, and she was his wife.

“Oh, yeah. I heard about you.” The sheriff chuckled and shook Riggins hand. “Well, you’re right, Mr. Tanner. We need proof who that rider was and that he was the one to set the fire. Did you see any kind of accelerant?” He turned to Red.

“Yeah, we found a tin of kerosene. It’s all burnt up, too.” Red kicked the debris pile where the ruined things had been left as if he expected the tin to show itself.

“I really wish you had waited until I got here to look at the scene before you took it all apart,” the sheriff stated with disappointment.

Red shrugged. “We got horses to tend to, Sheriff. They need shelter. We didn’t know when you’d make time to come out here.”

The sheriff visibly ruffled like an angry rooster at Red’s words. “I got out here as soon as I could, Red.”

“Sure, but we got a barn to rebuild, so why don’t you go back to town and arrest Edgar Wolfe for destroying the Ashburn’s property... er, I guess it’s the Tanner’s property now.” He glanced at Polly and Riggins with a slight smile.

“What I don’t understand is,” the sheriff began, “why would Edgar Wolfe be friendly enough to be partners with Lance one day and trying to destroy his business the next?”

“We don’t know either,” Riggins said.



“He wanted to take over.” Polly interrupted. “Upon my father’s death, he wanted to take over... everything, and he wanted my hand in marriage. Thank goodness Mr. Puckett had written an escape clause in that will that Wolfe had my daddy sign on his death bed, and I saw the way out. That’s why I ran off to Denver and got married.” She reached over to Riggins and took his elbow. He stood a little taller at her touch and lifted his chin slightly.

Willow tilted her head slightly, considering Polly. Unwarranted guilt flooded Polly’s heart. She was a married woman, and what her and Riggins did last night was proper behavior for a newlywed, she tried to reassure herself under Willow’s discerning glare.

“We came back here,” Riggins continued, “and more or less thwarted Mr. Wolfe’s plans. He was mighty angry when we last saw him.”

“But,” the sheriff continued to ponder. “Why would Lance Ashburn agree to such a wicked plan in the first place. Surely, he didn’t want to give his entire estate to a man who wasn’t even kin when he had a daughter, and potentially a son-in-law at some point, who could take things over when his time came.”

Everyone stood silent for what seemed like a long time.

Willow cleared her throat. “It was... because... Mr. Wolfe knew something no one else knew... and he was holding it over Mr. Ashburn’s head to get what he wanted.”

The group turned to look at Willow.

“Do you know what that secret was, Willow?” Polly asked.

She nodded slowly and tears slid from her eyes. “Your daddy was protecting you, Polly, from something he never wanted you to know.”

Red took Willow by the shoulders. “*Mo chroí*, don’t.”

“No, *Ruairi*, she has a right to know. After all these years, it’s only fair to tell her.” Willow twisted out of his grasp.

Polly gasped. “Me? Why me? Lance Ashburn hardly ever gave me the time of day. I was a disappointment to him...” She choked. “On a count of I was the only child who lived, and I was a girl.”

“No.” Willow shook her head. “That’s not the whole of it.”

“What do you mean?” Polly clung to Riggins’s arm. If he hadn’t held her firmly, she was sure she would have buckled.

Willow opened and closed her mouth. Red held her shoulders. Finally, Willow uttered the words. “Polly, your mother, Mrs. Ashburn died giving birth—”

“I know that!” Polly blurted. “She died giving birth to me.”

Willow pursed her lips, smothering her words with a fisted hand. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“No.” Red continued gently. “Mrs. Ashburn died giving birth to her fifth son. The next day, My Willow gave birth... to you.”

“What?” Polly leaned against Riggins. She could feel her knees giving way. “Willow? Is my mother?” She lifted her eyes slowly to Red. “I don’t have a twin?” Her eyes darted about, but she saw nothing. Her mind tried to sort this new information out. She turned back to Red. “Then, you’re—”

“No,” Red shook his head. “Mr. Ashburn is your father.”

Willow turned into Red’s shoulder and sobbed. He held his wife. “My wife has borne this secret a very long time. She was young, we were naïve, and she had succumbed to her boss’s advances. When she realized she was with child, he denied that the child was his. We were indentured servants, immigrated from Ireland. It was how we paid for our time here so we could be citizens in America. We had little choice but to hide the secret.

“She came to me thinking I would reject her, too, but I loved my wife. We had not been able to have a child, and I considered it a twist of fate in our favor. We promised to pretend the child was mine, so that Mr. Ashburn would allow us to continue to work for the ranch.

“When Mrs. Ashburn died, and then Willow gave birth to Polly, Mr. Ashburn’s heart softened for the child. He admitted she was his daughter. He begged us to let him keep her and raise her as if she were from his wife’s womb. He made a pact with us to keep us under his employment. When our indentured service was final, he put us on his payroll for life. Or as long as we wanted.

“Willow could raise her child as if she were the nanny. She agreed because that way, Polly would have the advantage of being

Ashburn's child, and Willow would get to watch Polly grow up. We have lived this lie all this time for Polly's sake."

Willow stood with her head hung over, in shame.

Red slowly drew in a breath and let it out. "Somehow Edgar Wolfe found out and threatened to reveal the truth, but Mr. Ashburn wanted to protect Polly and the pretense that her mother was Mrs. Ashburn, so he went along with Wolfe and allowed him to be a partner in the horse ranch. I'm certain, it was only at his weakest, on his death bed, that he agreed without really knowing what he was doing, to sign that will for Mr. Wolfe. It's the only way that man could get that much control of this place and Mr. Ashburn's daughter."

Silence settled between them like dust. No one knew what to say, especially Polly. She stared at Red and then Willow.

"Now, that makes some sense." The sheriff pronounced, startling Polly.

"Wait!" Polly said. "So, *you* are actually *my* mother?" She focused on Willow.

Willow gathered herself, let go of Red, and stood as tall and proud as she could, considering she barely reached five foot. "Yes. I gave you life."

Polly's lip trembled as she fell toward Willow and enveloped her into her arms. Hugging her tightly.

"I have a mother!" She uttered against Willow's shoulder.

Riggins watch in silence.

"All right. So now that we have that part of the puzzle put together." The sheriff continued, oblivious of the emotional impact this information had made. "How can we prove who set this fire?"

Riggins stepped forward. "Well, I think we need to set a trap."

The group turned to look at him.

"What kind of trap?" Red asked.

Riggins smiled. "A really good one."

[OBI]



Riggins explained his idea for a human trap to catch Edgar Wolfe. "In order for this to work, we gotta count on Wolfe coming

back to the ranch.”

Red dragged the toe of his boot through the dirt. “How you gonna guarantee that’ll happen?”

Sheriff Hinkle nodded. “It’s a good plan, but Red’s right. How do you know that Wolfe will come back here again, and if he does, what guarantee do you have that it’ll be to cause damage?”

Riggins smiled. “We know for sure Wolfe set this fire.”

“Well—” the sheriff began.

“Look,” Riggins glanced at Red for assurance. “We may not have bonafide proof, but we know.”

Red nodded. “Without a doubt.”

“All right,” the sheriff conceded. “Let’s say we *suspect* Wolfe did this, if this trap of yours works, then you’d have absolute proof because you’d be catching him in the act for a second attempt to destroy this place, but I’d only be able to arrest him for the one account... you understand.”

“Sure.” Riggins nodded. “But if he should be holding the exact same type of tin of kerosene, then you might be able to tie the two events together and charge him with two counts of arson, right?”

The sheriff slowly nodded. “Maybe.”

“All right.” Riggins turned to Red. “Here’s what I want you to do.”

The plan was laid out and the sheriff returned to town. The hands helped dig a pit deep enough to trap a grown man, and Riggins took Polly into the house. “I didn’t know at the time why I felt so strongly about bringing this, but now I do.”

“What?” Polly rushed to stay up with him as they walked quickly to the guest bedroom. Her heart swelled with pride at the confidence her husband was exhibiting, planning this trap for Mr. Wolfe. She had first doubted he would take such a strong stance against her greedy enemy, but this was a new Riggins. The timid, shy man she’d met in Denver had faded and this new one emerged at just the right time.

Riggins opened his carpet bag and pulled out an enormous tarp of tanned hide. “This.” He held it up over his head, like a huge sheet. “We can use this to cover the pit with sod and grass. Wolfe will not

suspect a thing and will fall into the pit. We'll have him red-handed."

Polly smiled. "That's why your carpet bag looked so stuffed full. I wondered how many clothes you had stuffed in there." She giggled.

Riggins laid the hide on the bed and took her into his arms. He held her close for a moment. She closed her eyes, listening to his heartbeat. She loved being in his embrace. Too soon, he released her and stepped back. "Come on, let's set this trap."

The next morning, Red and Riggins climbed into the wagon and headed to Fort Collins's train depot. The lumber Red had ordered from Denver was scheduled to arrive by rail. They would load it into the wagon and make sure everyone in town knew they were planning a barn raising.

"Yeah, we wanted to let folks know about the Ashburn's barn burning down." Red idly leaned against a post near the depot while waiting for the train to arrive. He had spied a lieutenant from the fort who was also waiting for cargo to arrive and struck up a conversation with him. "And ask you to spread the word that we need a good ol' fashioned barn raising. We gotta get those quarter horses into shelter soon. With the town's help, we could have that barn built and move the horses in within one day."

"I'll let my commander know." The lieutenant nodded. "I'm sure he'll send some men out to help. You might talk to the mercantile owner. I'll bet he can get the word out for ya pretty quick, too."

"That's a good idea." Red agreed.

Riggins stood back, smiling. Red was more conversational than he was. Besides, he knew these people. Riggins was a stranger in this town. Although he could see himself becoming better acquainted with these people if he were to move his tanning business here. He couldn't imagine why he had been so narrow minded, thinking he couldn't move with his wife to Fort Collins and the Rafter-A Ranch. There really wasn't anything to hold him to Denver. Trappers could come to him these sixty miles north of Denver just as easily as they could the Depot District of Denver City.

The train whistle blew. The men turned to watch it slowly screech to a halt. Riggins and Red unloaded the lumber into the

wagon and tied it down since the stack was higher than the sides. Red pulled a little way from the depot and stopped at the general store. He had the same conversation with the owner as he had had with the lieutenant, and then they moved down to the barber. Riggins opted for a haircut while Red drank coffee and told the two middle aged barbers the story.

They moved down to the next hub of conversations, the Ladies Auxiliary, where blankets, scarfs, and mittens were knitted for the soldiers and missionaries in the Town Hall. Red yanked his hat off his head and tapped on the door. A finely dressed, grey haired woman answered and welcomed them both in. Over a pot of tea and sugar cookies, Riggins watched Red tell the women what was needed at the ranch. The women assured him they would speak to their husbands.

Before long they were on their way back to the ranch.

“Boy howdy!” Riggins shook his head. “Just four points of contact and the entire town is invited to a barn raising.”

Red nodded with a mischievous smile. “Yep. Fort Collins isn’t so big and the Ladies Auxiliary would have been enough to spread the word, but you needed a haircut and I wanted some coffee. I didn’t want the Lieutenant to mention to Hank Wilson, the mercantile owner, that we’d talked to him and he’d suggest we tell Hank, so that’s why we stopped in there, too. Can’t have folks offended because we didn’t speak to them directly.” Red chuckled.

Riggins smiled and sat quietly the remainder of the ride back to the ranch. Would the plan work? Would Wolfe hear about the barn raising planned for tomorrow morning and come this evening to burn the new lumber? It seemed reasonable to think he would. Tit-for-tat, as his mother used to say. Wolfe would want revenge for them thwarting his plans and do his best to thwart their efforts to recover from his destruction.

“Sour grapes.” Riggins recalled what Polly had explained. If Wolfe couldn’t have what he wanted, he wouldn’t let anyone else have it either. Riggins shook his head. What a waste of time and energy, always trying to take what wasn’t rightfully his in the first place.

Returning through the ranch’s large timber gate with the Rafter-

A brand burned into the cross timber, Riggins looked across the meadow toward the house for Polly. He'd missed her beside him while he and Red had gone to town. Would he always be this way, missing her after only a few hours of being apart?

There really was no way he could go back to Denver without her and there was equally no way he could ask her to leave Rafter-A Ranch. Especially now that she had learned her true mother was alive. They had a lot of catching up to do and he couldn't imagine taking her away from that. Besides, for all he knew, Polly could be with child already. She would want her family near if that were so.

Red drew the mule alongside the pit. The hands had made a lot of progress on digging it while Red and he had been gone. Now Riggins needed to anchor the hide across the hole enough to hold sod and grass, but not so well that the weight of a grown man wouldn't release the anchors. The sheriff had been asked to stay in the bunkhouse so that when the trap was sprung, he'd be close by to witness who they caught and make an arrest quickly.

By supper time, everything was set. The lumber had been stacked in line with the camouflaged pit. Wolfe would have to go out of his way to miss the trap. More than likely, he'd make a straight path toward the lumber and fall in before he knew what had happened.

Willow and Cookie had collaborated on a huge meal for everyone, and they ate outdoors again like they had the night they cleared the barn debris. Riggins sat with Polly while scraping ham, red-eye gravy, biscuits and beans from their plates. They exchanged flirtatious smiles while they ate.

It was no surprise when she pulled him into her bedroom as they walked along the upstairs hall. This was their room now. Her bed had become their marriage bed. That suited Riggins just fine. She opened her window a few inches, so they could hear if anyone fell into the pit during the night, and turned to him with a glow of amore in her cheeks that he adored. He stepped up to her, bracketing her face in his hands, and kissed her luscious lips.

She kissed him back. He loved her passion. Slow to bloom, but

mighty once it did. They fell, entangled in one another's arms, onto her bed and shared their love again until they fell asleep, exhausted.



## Chapter Eight

[08]



A scream woke Polly. She sat straight up, untangling herself from her husband's arm and leg that had been thrown over her during their sleep. "Riggins!" She whispered. "Riggins, wake up!"

He stirred. "What is it?" He lifted on an elbow, smiling at her as she peeked out the window, holding the curtain like a drape to cover herself. Blackness filled the yard.

"I heard something," she whispered. The scream turned to howling, human howling, and it definitely came from the direction of the pit. Was it Wolfe? Had he hurt himself falling into the pit? She turned to grab her dressing gown, pulling it to her chest, and ran into Riggins who had risen from the bed.

"Get dressed," he said. "I'll go check it out." He hurried into his britches and pulled his shirt over his shoulders, tucking the hem as he hopped to get into his boots.

She tossed down her dressing gown and reached for her dirty work skirt and blouse instead. Hurrying to catch up, she rushed downstairs. "Willow! Red!" She hollered as she ran past the servants' bedroom. "I think we caught something."

Polly ran through the backdoor into the yard.

Stopping abruptly, she realized everyone was standing around the pit, including Willow and Red. She'd yelled at an empty room. Riggins and the ranch hands were gathered on one end. The sheriff's silhouette lingered on the opposite side. Everyone looked down.

Polly walked up to the edge of the hole to find Edgar Wolfe lying on his back, a large tin can beside his hand. The moonlight glistened off the liquid which covered his face and saturated his clothes. He sputtered and spit, gasping as if he had pulled himself from a lake and still felt the effects of drowning.

"Get me outta here!" He bellowed and coughed. He sounded like a young boy rather than the mean, conniving man he had been.

Polly pushed through the shoulder-to-shoulder people and peered down. "Whatcha doing down there, Mr. Wolfe?" Polly said with glee in her voice.

"Miss Ashburn," Wolfe choked. "Polly! Please! Help me outta here. I was just bringing you some— I didn't mean you no harm. Please help me get outta here. I think I hurt my ankle," he pleaded.

"Awww. That's too bad. Maybe Willow can fix you a poultice." Polly mocked. "Just a minute, I'll check with her. Willow?"

"Yes, Polly?"

"You gotta poultice on ya? Seems Mr. Wolfe hurt his ankle while trying to catch our new lumber on fire."

"Nope, can't say I got one on me" Willow hollered back across the pit.

"Now, hold on. I wasn't gonna do nothing like that, Polly. I swear!" Wolfe squirmed himself around to his hands and knees and tried to stand, but his ankle gave way and he ended up just kneeling instead. He huffed and struggled, breathing heavily as if he'd climbed a steep hill. Wincing every time he attempted to get to his feet.

Maybe he really did sprain his ankle? Good! Served him right.

"Oh really?" Riggins yelled down at him. "Then what's that kerosene next to ya, and all over your clothes."

"I-I, well, I can explain. It's not kerosene! It's—" Wolfe walked on his knees to awkwardly turn around and face Riggins standing above him. "I—"

"Only thing I need you to explain, Mr. Wolfe, is why you burned the barn down in the first place and why you thought you'd do it again with our new lumber!"

Anger contorted his face in the moonlight. "Now, see here..." He barked. "There are things you don't know." He swiveled to face Polly. "Polly, sweetheart! There are things that I kept secret for your sake. I was gonna protect you and your daddy's secret 'til my dying day!" His eyes darted to the men standing at the edge of the pit. Finding Riggins again, he glared at him. "Until you intruded on my future!" Wolfe spat and turned back to Polly. "I would have loved you, Polly! I didn't care that you were a bastard child. I would have married you and made

you a legitimate lady.”

Polly planted her fists on her hips. “What did you call me?”

Riggins stepped up beside her, wrapping his arm around her waist. Never had she felt so proud of another human being in her life.

Wolfe’s eyes widened. “I know the truth about you, Polly! They’ve been keeping a secret from you all your life” —pointing a shaky finger at Willow and Red— “and I was gonna marry you anyway, you see, Willow O’Byrne—”

“Is my real mother.” Polly finished for him. “Yeah, that’s old news around here, Mr. Wolfe.”

He stared at her, blinking. Then he stretched out his arms in a pleading fashion. “Please, Polly, get me outta this hole.”

“Oh, we’ll get you out.” Riggins stated. “But first, you need to confess.”

“Confess?” He chuckled. “To what?”

Riggins mouth turned up on one side into an amused grin. “To forcing Polly’s father to make you a partner, to making him sign that will on his death bed, and to lighting that fire to the Ashburn’s beautiful equestrian barn the other day.”

Wolfe shook his head. “No. None of that’s true. I swear!”

Riggins reached into his pocket and pulled out the box. “We already have you red-handed for trying to burn this lumber. All we need now is for you to confess to everything else.” Slowly, he opened the box, meticulously lifted a match. Allowing Wolfe plenty of time to see what Riggins was doing, he dragged the fire stick along the abrasive strip built into the side. A flame sparked to life and burned brightly, filling his face with yellow light. He smiled down at Wolfe.

“Now, wait, Tanner!” Wolfe sputtered. “Polly! Help me! Don’t let him do nothing you’ll regret.”

He held the match up and out, as if he were about to flick it into the pit.

“Hold up! Stop!” Wolfe screamed. “I got kerosene all over me! Please don’t!”

“Thought you said it wasn’t kerosene!” Riggins pulled the match back closer to his face.

"I-I lied. I'm sorry." Wolfe dropped his head to his chin.

"Yes, and what else have you lied about?" Riggins held the match out again. It was getting close to his fingers, but he held it just the same.

"All right, all right. I did all those things. I did. Please don't turn me into a human torch!"

"All right!" Sheriff Hinkle announced. "I've heard enough."

Wolfe swirled around to the sheriff's voice. Fear shone in his eyes. Did he not realize the sheriff was among the onlookers?

"Let's get that man out of this pit and I'll escort him to town."

"Sheriff!" Wolfe squawked. "This whole thing was a set-up!"

Riggins stepped forward with a rope, tossed it into the pit. "Take a hold of this, Wolfe. We'll pull you out."

As Wolfe limped and struggled to climb out, he glared hatefully at Riggins. On top of the pit, he stood with the rope hanging limp from his rotund waist. The sheriff slipped up behind Wolfe and slapped cuffs on his wrist.

"That's right, Edgar. We caught you red-handed, but if you hadn't been so greedy coming back to destroy their new wood, you might have gotten away with all the rest. As it is, I've got you dead to rights and you're gonna spend a long time in prison."

Wolfe hung his head and let the sheriff lead him to the horses that had been saddled and tied with Wolfe's grey gelding while Riggins scared a confession out of Wolfe.

Riggins put his arm around Polly, and the two of them watched the sheriff take the man away.

Willow approached Polly. "You two ought to move into your daddy's room. The bed's bigger and the room has more room for Riggins's things."


Polly blushed. There was no doubt that Willow knew they had completed their marriage obligations body and soul. "I like my room. You two should move in there. There's no reason for you to continue on as servants. You're my parents and rightful partners in this ranch."

Riggins tilted his head. "I have another idea."

The three turned their attention to him.

He smiled.

[OBJ]



The morning sun rose, filling the clouds with pinks and purples. Red sat high on the wagon as he drove the mule out of the new equestrian barn. A tarp covered the goods in the wagon. The same tarp that had been used to disguise the pit that had trapped Edgar Wolfe just a few months ago. Ropes criss-crossed over the canvas to keep everything in place.

Willow and Polly walked out the back door with their arms around each others' waists. Tears filled both of their faces. Polly sniffed. "I'm not ready for you to leave."

"Yes, you are." Willow turned to face her. She fussed with Polly's hair, pulling it back from her eyes. "You have mastered the art of cooking, I've written down every recipe I know so you can refer to them if you don't remember. I've taught you everything I know about keeping a house in order."

Willow reluctantly nodded. "Yes, but I don't want you to go."

Riggins stepped up to his wife. "Honey, it's time for Willow and Red to go be their own bosses."

"I know." She whined and wiped a tear from her cheek. "I'm just gonna miss you so much, Momma."

Willow drew a ragged breath. "We are not far apart. We can write and Red and I will come visit. Maybe we'll deliver the leather goods in person from time to time so we can see you, check on things here at the ranch."

Red leapt down and walked to Riggins. "We don't need to check on nothing. Riggins has picked up on all the ins and outs of running a horse ranch. He's gonna do a fine job." Red shook Riggins's hand. "We sure appreciate you letting us take over your leather shop in Denver, Riggins. The wife is happy, despite them tears you see right now. She's thrilled to have our own place above the shop. And you're right, it's been a lifetime dream of ours to own our own business. I promise you, we'll do our best tanning hides and continuing with what your family started."

Riggins nodded. "It's my pleasure. And I am honored to know that you and Willow will run the shop. I think my father and grandfathers before him would be pleased that we have made this switch."

They shook hands again, and Polly and Willow hugged, tearfully. Willow broke away from Polly, taking Red's hand and climbed onto the bench. Red turned to look over the ranch land, the barn, and the house. "I'm gonna miss this place." He muttered and sat down on the bench with his wife. "You two take good care of each other."

Riggins put his arm around his wife. "We will. Godspeed."

Red waved at everyone and flicked the reins. The mule lunged forward. Polly and Riggins stood in the yard and watched them trundle down the road toward the old wagon road that led to Denver. Polly sighed and wiped her face. "I am so happy they are no longer servants, but I sure was hoping for more time with my mother."

"I know." Riggins hugged her waist. "You two can write, and I'm sure they will do as they said and come back for visits, especially holidays."

"I hope you're right." Polly continued to watch even though they were nothing but a remnant dust cloud in the distance.

"Mister Tanner?" Slim, the new stable master called from the barn. "That mare is down. I think it's her time."

Riggins kissed his wife's forehead. "Gotta go see about a new foal."

He ran with Slim into the barn.

"I'll get some clean cloths and meet you in a little bit." Polly turned to run into the house. For good measure, she put on a large pot of water to boil while she helped Riggins with the mare.

Willow had shown her to keep a stack of folded cloth in the mudroom just outside the kitchen, for washing up when Riggins came in for the evening, and to take out to the barn when the mares had their foals. They had six mares carrying now. This one was the first that Riggins and Polly would deliver as the new owners of Rafter-A Ranch. She was excited and scared. They'd not done this without Red's guidance.

She found Riggins just outside the mare's stall. Slim sat on the sidewall with his hands folded between his knees, a rope dangled from his fingertips, in case the mare needed help. Riggins turned to Polly as she entered with her pile of clean rags. "She's doing great."

Polly peeked over the gate to watch the mare grunt and her belly expand with a tremendous effort. Slim eased down and gently lifted the mare's tail. "I see hooves... and a nose." He jumped back as the foal slid from its mother's body along with a gush of fluids. "It's a girl!" Slim announced.

Riggins rushed into the stall just as the mare turned to lick her baby. "Clever girl!" He praised the mare.

"Oh, she's beautiful!" Polly squealed. "Just beautiful!" She stroked the mare's neck. "I want to name her "Willow's Prize."

Riggins smiled. "That's an excellent name for our first foal."

"Well, she's not my first, but certainly *our* first together." Polly grinned.

He held her beside him as they watched the baby struggle to stand. Her spindly legs wobbled as she staggered and finally found her balance. The mare rocked to her feet as well, and stood still for her daughter to nurse.

Polly wiped a tear. "I love watching this."

Riggins squeezed her closer. "I know what you mean."

Slim grabbed one of the rags and wiped his hands and pant legs. "I'll clean up the stall, you two go on—"

Another mare whinnied with a grunting, straining sound. Riggins turned to Polly with wide eyes. "You think another one is foaling?"

"They usually do that." Polly laughed. "It's contagious." They scanned the stalls and found the mare. She definitely was working hard and lying on her side. Polly smiled at Riggins. "Here we go again."

"I love this life." Riggins pulled her into him and kissed her soundly. "I love you."

She giggled. "I love you, too."

They turned to the mare to see if she needed help. Another mare whinnied and grunted. Riggins eyes widened. "Another one?"

Polly shrugged. "That's how it goes on a horse breeding ranch."

Riggins shook his head. "I suppose you're right. I thought this would be a peaceful existence."

Polly sighed as she walked down to another stall and rested her chin on her hands, as she watched the mare fold down into the straw. "This is peaceful, husband."

"If you say so." Riggins chuckled. "Although I gotta admit I miss Red and Willow already."

She smiled sadly, "Me, too, and yet I'm happy for them."

Slim rushed by with a barrel full of soiled straw. "You two gonna stand around all day?"

"Nope." Riggins laughed. "We were just taking a minute to appreciate what we have."

Slim gave him a curious look and continued out the barn with the muck. Riggins pulled Polly into his arms for one more kiss. "You'd think he was the boss, not me."

Polly giggled. "Nope, we are in this together."

"Right you are." Riggins kissed her forehead and returned to his task at hand.



# Epilogue

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The following December...

“Oh, look! We got a letter from Willow!” Polly squealed as she slid a letter opener through the seal. Running her eyes over the penned words, she smiled.

“What does she say?” Riggins sat down with a cup of coffee. He had a wagon full of goods from town to unload but wanted to bring in the post. He’d seen the letter from Denver and knew Polly would be excited to receive news of her mother.

“They have adopted an orphan!” She looked up with surprise written all over her face. “They are teaching him the tanning trade and keeping the lineage of the Tanner-O’Byrne Tanning shop going for generations to come.” She smiled. “It’s... amazing.”

“Yeah. I never thought about my family’s trade ending with them taking over the business. I’m glad they did.”

“I guess that means I have a brother.” Her eyes twinkled. She continued to read. Then she burst out laughing. “Willow says she was hoping for news of our family expanding.” Polly giggled again. “I guess I should write to her and let her in on our Christmas news.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t already.” Riggins emptied his cup and stood. “Well, I’ve got a wagon to unload.”

“Willow taught me that a woman should wait until she had to adjust her skirt over her belly before she let word get out she was in a family way. Besides, I wanted it to be their Christmas present that they are going to be grandparents.”

Riggins kissed her forehead and touched the baby bump at her waist. “Well, I think it’s time then.” He smiled and headed for the back door. “Write to your mother and let her know about our good news. I’ll send Slim to town to post it for you. He’s always happy to have an excuse to ride to town, I think he’s got a gal he’s seeing.

Maybe I should have a talk with him. If he's planning on getting married anytime soon, we need to start building some cabins for our men to live in when they take wives."

"You think Willow and Red will come here for Christmas, like they said they would? I'd sure love to have my mother here for the holiday, but if she comes this Christmas, will she come back in the spring when my time comes?"

"If you ask, I'm sure she will do both. They have the resources and the excuse to come, bringing hides for the ranch instead of sending them by rail." Riggins blew her a kiss and walked outside.

Polly smiled down at her bulging belly. "I want you to meet your grandmother as soon as you come into this world."

She rose to her feet and walked to her daddy's den. She pulled out some stationery from his huge desk and sat down to write Willow their good news and invite them and her new brother to the ranch for Christmas. What a wonderful Christmas it would be. A new brother and a new baby on the way, her family together once again. It was more than she could ask of the Good Lord.

All their troubles were behind them with Edgar Wolfe in prison. The ranch had recently signed a new contract with the military and several local ranches for cutting horses. The Rafter-A Ranch was prosperous, and she and Riggins were happy. She just couldn't believe her luck. Perhaps she would write a second letter and thank Mrs. Gordon, too. After all, it was she who determined she and Riggins belonged together.

How right she had been.

Polly glanced out the window, seeing her husband carrying the goods into the barn and coming back for more. She smiled. "Thank you, Lord," she uttered a quick prayer of gratitude.

Riggins was the perfect match for Polly.

THE END

[OBI]



# About the Author



Lynn Donovan is an author, playwright, and director who spends her days chasing after her muses trying to get them to behave long enough to write their stories. The results are numerous novels, multi-author series, anthologies, dramatizations, and short stories.

Lynn enjoys reading and writing all kinds of romance fiction: historical, paranormal, speculative, contemporary, cozy mystery, and time travel. But you never know what her muses will come up with for a story, so you could see a novel under any given genre. All that can be said is keep your eyes open, because these muses are not sitting still for long!

Oops, there they go again...

You can learn more about Lynn on [her blog](#), follow her on [Twitter](#) @MLynnDonovan, Facebook Author page at [LynnDonovanFGG](#) and her [website LynnDonovanAuthor.com](#).

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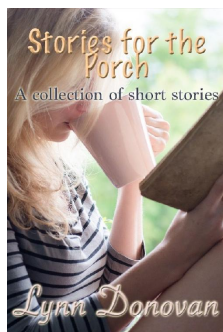
# Appreciation

Thank you to everybody in my life who has contributed in one way or another to the writing of this book. My husband, my children, my children-in-law, and my grandchildren. You all are my unconditional fans. My BETA reader and grammar guru who make me look gooder than I am. [Bad grammar intended.] My fellow author friends who chat with me daily to exchange ideas, encourage, maintain sanity, and keep me from being a total recluse/hermit.

Mostly I thank God for the talent he has given me. I hope to hear you say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant,” when I cross the Jordan and run into your arms—Many, many years from now. :).

# Newsletter and a Free Gift for You

Hey! Thank you for purchasing and reading my book, A Match for Polly. I'd like to give you a parting gift to show my appreciation. Sign up for my newsletter [here](#). I will send you an e-copy of a collection of short stories I wrote purely for your entertainment. I will happily send you this e-copy for FREE, if you ask. I will also add you to my NEWSLETTER list and you will receive up-to-date information on new release before anyone else.



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Thank you again, and God Bless.

~Lynn Donovan

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